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CHRISTMAS NUMBER 1987



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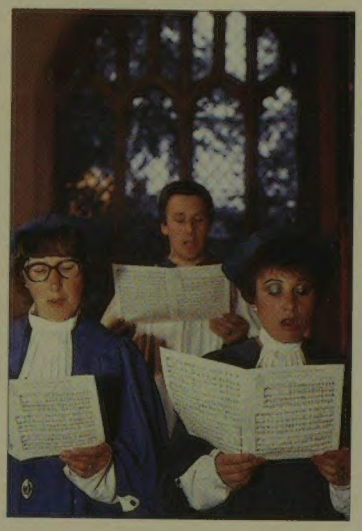
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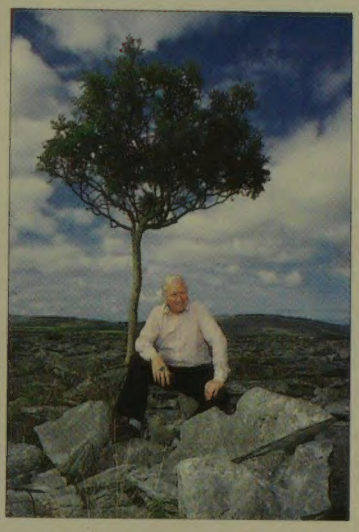
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Reclaiming CHRISTMAS

"Well, padre, it's your busy time!" Most parsons hear this sort of thing around Christmas. We are certainly more visible than usual, officiating at carol services and Nativity plays. At the Christmas services, those who make their annual trek to their local church catch a glimpse of their parish priest. Impressions about the Church are confirmed or perhaps changed.

We need to be at our best. Some of my colleagues give up. A country parson with five or six churches to take care of may well be forgiven for saying, "Since we all know what this great festival is about, we will omit the sermon today," as he prepares to rush to his next assignment.

It is not so easy to be tolerant of those clergy who, standing 6 feet above contradiction in the pulpit, their glazed eyes fixed on the third pillar on the left, launch into a tirade about the materialism of the secular Christmas, and attack all those who are not in church. Christmas is also a time for the eccentric preacher to come into his own. Last year some friends went to morning service on Christmas Day in deepest Herefordshire; the sprightly 82-year-old vicar, taking advantage of a larger captive audience than usual, regaled the congregation for half an hour with his theories about Queen Boadicea.

But if the preacher takes seriously the congregation who turn up at Midnight Mass or the Christmas Day service, then he certainly has his time cut out in preparing what he has to say.

He has, first of all, to show what the Christmas stories are about. They look like historical biographies. But they are nothing of the kind. To think of them in that way is to trivialize, discredit and ultimately to destroy them—after all, who is interested in believing in fairy stories? Rather, the preacher will start not with Christmas, but with the extraordinary Big Bang experience of the Resurrection when the disciples had an overwhelming sense that God had raised Jesus up, that everything Jesus had said and done about the Kingdom was vindicated. The Christmas stories were written in the glow of the Resurrection. They are beautiful and profound meditations on the person of Jesus—the Word made flesh.

These meditations are rooted in the Jewish roots of Christianity—the Old Testament. The Old Testament allusions in the early chapters of Matthew and Luke are not predictions of the birth of the Messiah; they are saying that everything in the past history of the Jewish people (who had a much greater sense of history than ever we can imagine) was discovered in Jesus.

The story of Herod slaughtering the children echoes the story of the young Moses who miraculously escapes Pharaoh's plan to murder the Hebrew children. Here is a new Moses, a new liberator, a saviour. The title given to Jesus—King of the Jews—at Bethlehem echoes the story of the greatest of the Jewish Kings, David. Here is a new David, bringing justice and peace. The story of the wise men with their gifts, guided to the child by a star, echoes the story of the Queen of Sheba bringing gifts to Solomon. Here is a new Solomon, the wisest of them all. A new Moses, a new David, a new Solomon—this was the way the writers of the Christmas stories conveyed their excitement about the significance of Jesus Christ.

The idea of Jesus as liberator, bringer of peace and God's Kingdom and the possessor of wisdom, leads to the other themes for the preachers' Christmas sermon—that Christianity is not a religion primarily of consolation, but of faith and hope in the struggle to work for God's Kingdom, and the knowledge that wherever there is goodness there is something of God.

The Christmas stories are uncomfortable. They are awkwardly subversive. As they are read in great cathedrals and churches in the presence of large congregations, they seem so out of place—although like so much of our religion, they have been domesticated and tamed almost out of existence.

Luke shows how pretentious, fragile and illusory the Roman Emperors' claims to be gods had become, and how their boasting of prosperity and peace for the Empire was bogus. The mystery of the Incarnation is unveiled to the poorest of the poor—the shepherds. They lived in the fields for they had nowhere else to go; they were always on the move. The Emperor had ordered a census to control his unmanageable Empire. But no census could catch the restless shepherds.

And the song of countless angels announced quite a different sort of peace under a different sort of king who invites us to "Love your enemies and do good to them who hate you."

Christianity is utopian. Its demands are impossible to meet. Its promises are unrealistic, yet for all its impossibilities—the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, for example—the manifesto of the Kingdom of God has strength, clarity and sanity in sharp contrast to the adulation of greed and blindness and lack of concern about "the neighbour".

Yet God became like men and women at Christmas in order that men and women might become like God; and that means a conscious choice for those who recognize the truth behind the stories to take their part in bringing to birth a new creation of peace, beauty and justice—never to be realized this side of the grave.

It is not an easy task, nor a very popular one. Failure, violence and sin are never far away. The Christmas stories were written not just after Easter, but also in the shadow of Good Friday. St Luke describes the place where the baby will be born as a manger, and that is the same word used to describe the place where the body of Jesus was laid after the Crucifixion. A ledge in the rock from which animals in caves could easily reach their food was the bed for the new-born baby, and the tomb for a dead man. This was why the angel says to the shepherds that "this will be a sign"—the Passion is foretold. The practice of Christianity leads inevitably to trouble, persecution and death, as many Christians are discovering in Central America and Southern Africa today.

If the preacher can get across something of the joy, struggle, toughness, simplicity and excitement of the Christian life, then his business at Christmas will not have been in vain.

Happy Christmas ○

by Donald Reeves
Rector of St James's Church, Piccadilly

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THE SHOT MADONNA



Wounded by a gunman's bullet in July, the Leonardo Cartoon is now in the care of the micro-surgeons of the National Gallery. Sarah Jane Checkland reports on their prognosis.

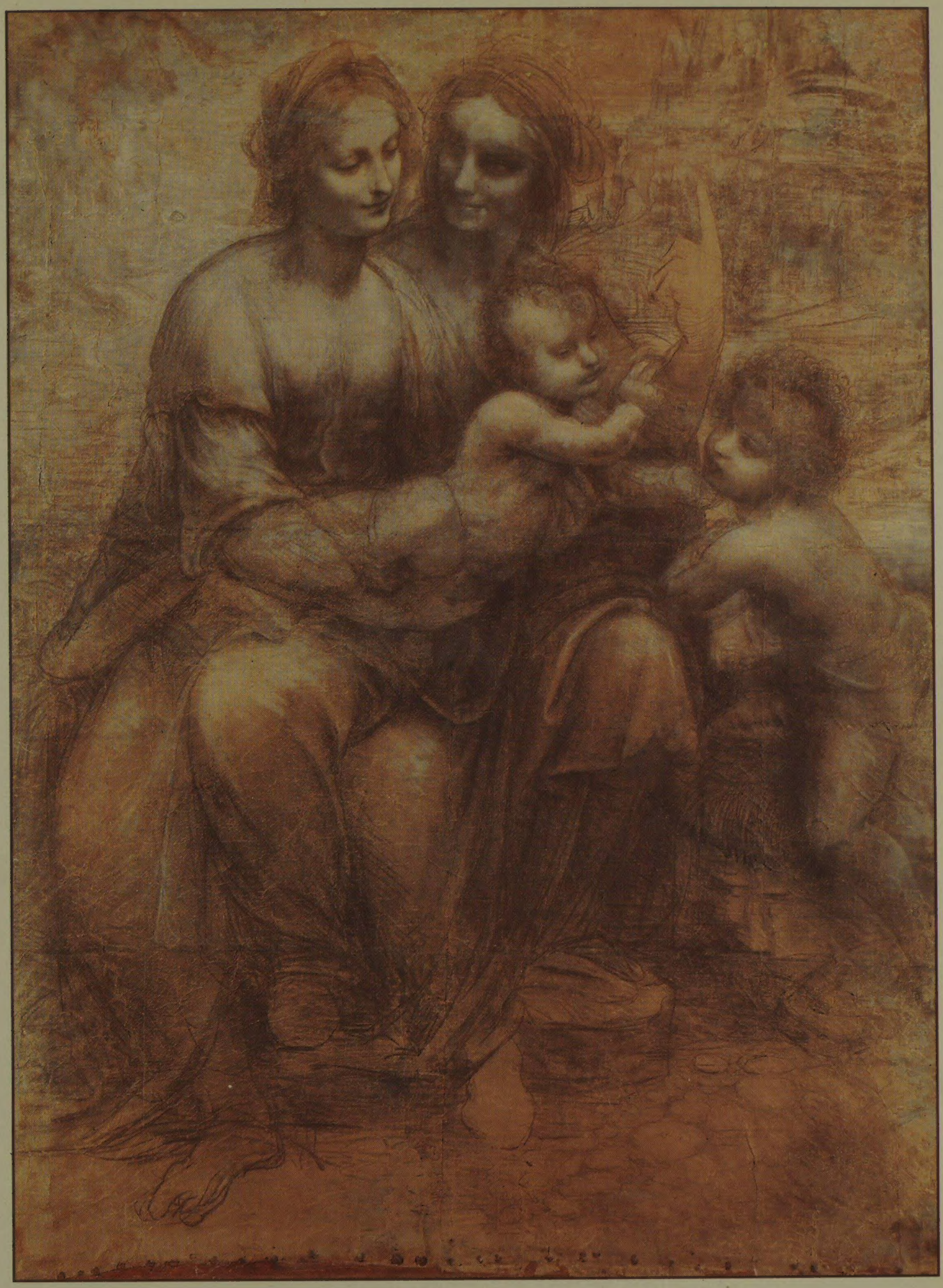
The most poignant testimony to the powers of the Leonardo Cartoon is the wound inflicted by its notorious shotgun attacker. On July 17 this year a 37-year-old Wimbledon man made his way to the National Gallery, a shotgun in his pocket. Having sat in the special darkened, womb-like gallery contemplating Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin and Child with St Anne and the infant St John the Baptist*, a vision of maternal bliss, he fired direct at the Virgin's bosom.

This is not the first time the Leonardo Cartoon has been attacked. During the public appeal to save the work for the nation in 1962, a man threw a bottle of ink at it. Luckily the work was protected by a Perspex shield, and suffered only a small chain of scratches, which were shortly repaired. The offender was seized by an attendant before he could throw his second bottle.

Over recent decades there have been a number of attacks on Old Master paintings, most famously Rembrandt's *The Nightwatch* at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam in 1975, and Poussin's *Adoration of the Golden Calf* at the National Gallery in 1978. It is difficult to understand the motives of attackers. They seem to be a combination of revenge—destroying something of value, both aesthetic and financial—and delusion: the work is so powerful, the attacker loses his reason.

As the Gallery's director Neil MacGregor said after the incident, the Cartoon is of particular sentimental importance to Britain. It was the subject of a public appeal when £800,000 was raised to buy it from the Royal Academy. "It is an object which in a very special sense belongs to the public," MacGregor says.

Once the damage was done, the priority was for specialists to get on with the job of treatment. The Cartoon was carried to the Gallery's basement like some wounded hero, and placed in what was described at the time as a "life-support system" comprising a wooden frame and polythene cover. It can be harmful in the long term to start treating damaged art works too quickly.



THE NATIONAL GALLERY

Da Vinci's Virgin and Child with St Anne and the infant St John the Baptist *before the attack, above, but showing some signs of age and neglect, and, left, its present condition with the Madonna's damaged chest all too visible.*

Apart from the fact that restoration is by definition painstaking, the Leonardo Cartoon has its own peculiar problems and requires serious analysis.

The National Gallery's excellent conservation and scientific departments are equipped to treat paintings, but have no facilities for drawings. Indeed, the entire field of paper conservation is new, barely 15 years old, compared to a tradition of oil-painting restoration which stretches back centuries. No one used to bother to treat drawings as they were not so highly regarded as paintings so no tradition of restoration evolved. Judging from the recent auction records (a Rembrandt drawing fetched £3 million), things have changed.

The Cartoon is nearly 500 years old and at 56 by 41 inches, it is huge. It consists of eight sheets of paper pasted together by the artist, and fixed at some unknown time to another layer of paper. The two layers were glued in the late 17th to early 18th century to a flax canvas, in a bodged way. Attack or no attack, there may well have been an urgent case for general conservation treatment, in order to stabilize the fragile remains.

But it is the shotgun-damaged area itself, shaped like a vicious kick from a horse, that presents the greatest problems. Martin Wyld, the Gallery's chief restorer, described it as follows: "The pellets from the shotgun seem to have bounced back into the room; they have not penetrated the Cartoon. However, the glass was pulverized and caved in under the impact within an area about 6 inches across . . . some small fragments of the paper became detached and fell down between the glass and the mount at the bottom of the frame. These fragments have been recovered." Although the Gallery had used reinforced, laminated glass, it had avoided the use of bullet-proof glass as it is very thick, and would have obscured the work.

Presumably, the impact of the shot will also have loosened and dislodged some of the original charcoal shading from the area. Whereas with oil paintings restorers can touch up on areas which have suffered paint loss, knowing that their work can be removed with chemicals at a later stage, it would be unethical for paper conservators to do the same. For, unlike paintings, any retouching becomes an integral part of the drawing, and is impossible to remove.

For all these reasons, the Gallery has invited the advice of paper conservators from the Victoria & Albert Museum, the British Museum, the Tate Gallery and the Royal Collection, Windsor, before deciding on a course of treatment. It seems likely they will be faced with an awesome dilemma between two possible courses of treatment: major overhaul, or minor surgery.

Jane McAusland is a well established private paper-conservator who has been practising since the 60s. She was a major instigator of the Institute of Paper Conservators, formed in 1976, and has travelled the world studying conservation methods, her most recent trip being to Russia. She does not underestimate the challenge ahead. "It is going to take a lot of thinking about and a lot of minds to do the work, and even then they might come to the wrong decision." The first task, she says, is to ascertain how stable the picture is.

Apart from the fact that to the naked eye the surface looks as delicate as gossamer, there is a basic incompatibility between its paper layers and the canvas. As Miss McAusland says, "Canvas and paper are not compatible, the first being woven, and the second being pressed fibres." She thinks the best course of action might be to remove the paper entirely from the canvas and give it a more compatible support. "In the National Gallery it's in a stable environment and won't deterioriate very much more," Miss McAusland says. "But you never know what might happen in time of war, or even if the air-conditioning plant suddenly broke down."

Depending on the state of the canvas, it might come off easily, like ancient hessian wallpaper. On the other hand, its glue might be so thick and heavy that it has penetrated the paper fibres. If that is the case, she thinks, the Gallery may have to use an ultrasonic humidifying machine, currently being developed in America. This machine comprises a chamber into which the work is placed, face upwards, and high-pitched sound waves atomize water into vapour so that the adhesive will become swollen by the moisture, enabling the layers to be separated. Once the canvas is removed, the drawing could be relined with contemporary Japanese paper. Made from the pulp of mulberry trees, it has very long, strong fibres, and makes an ideal alternative backing.

Finally, the relined drawing could be attached to a support made from aluminium honeycomb with a fibreglass surface. Manufactured by the German firm Ciba-Geigy, such material is used for the making of aircraft wings. "It's very, very light, very, very strong, and it doesn't move around like wood," explains Jane McAusland who has learned to adapt products from other industries for her purposes.

Some restorers think it would be too risky to take the Cartoon off its canvas, as it might literally fall to bits. Jane McAusland says, "Expansion and contraction of the work over all these years may have rendered the papers completely rotten." If, however, the lining paper is not rotten, then a compromise course of action could be taken: to take the two layers of paper off the canvas as one complete unit, keeping them together.

The less drastic option, at least in the short term, is to repair the damaged area alone. This would be no mean task in itself, judging from the mass of stretched and torn fibres, the top layer of paper being inextricably mixed up with its backing. Conservators will have to analyse the two layers of glue involved—probably starch paste followed by animal glue—in order to work out which materials are relevant to the surface picture and which are part of the backing, and then to separate them with care. Then the challenge will be to piece the whole forlorn puzzle together, each fragment in its rightful place. Meanwhile, they will have to find a way of coaxing the canvas, blasted into a bulge, back into its former flatness.

Whatever course is taken, we will never know what the Leonardo Cartoon looked like when the artist put down his charcoal stick and abandoned the work, unfinished. The surface—beige-coloured paper coated in a dusty pink colour before being drawn on with charcoal and white highlights—has been so rubbed around and so exposed over the years that its top layer of drawing has long gone. What remains is the underlayer, engrained into the paper.

Jane McAusland thinks the rust marks from old nails around the edges can be removed with a suction table and gentle rinsing. But as regards the damaged area: "Much of it will be lost for ever," she says. "You can aim only to make a sympathetic repair." ○

'The challenge will be to piece the whole forlorn puzzle together, each fragment in its rightful place'



Quality in an age of change.

HOW CHANGED IS OUR VILLAGE?

A new breed of dweller is shaking Village England to its foundations. Michael Watkins sniffs out new blood from old in Boxford, Suffolk. Photographs by Ian Berry.



'Those who stay become feudally-minded . . . They're 20th-century Tudor types, from humble roots but longing for tradition.'





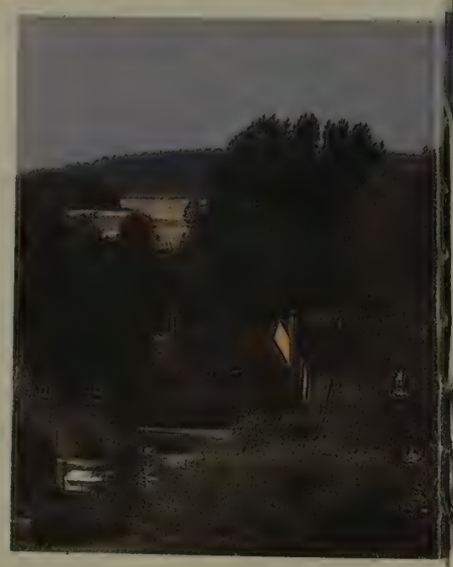
The graveyard of Boxford church is well planted with mute inglorious Miltons, their dust restored to this corner of England that bore them. They were not innovators; neither was it in them to challenge the order of things. They were born to do as they were told, each knowing his place; they were reared to duty. When they were called to arms, they went. They shed their youth and their blood, some of them, in foreign fields; and if, at the going down of the sun and in the morning, we remember them, they would expect no more. Boxford never stole the limelight.

John Winthrop, from the adjoining parish of Groton, convinced that "evil times are come when the Church must fly to the wilderness", set sail in 1630 to found Boston and become first governor of Massachusetts. At nearby Polstead in 1828 wicked Squire William Corder murdered Maria Marten in the Red Barn; a foul deed which addicts of village hall melodramatics will never let us forget. Boxford's chief claim to fame, or infamy, is that Corder faced the magistrates in a panelled room at The Fleece Hotel before being hanged in front of 10,000 people at Bury St Edmunds.

Corder apart, between the heart-stopping excitement of Domesday Book's compilation and the invention of the petrol engine, nothing much happened in Boxford. Mind you, it was not a totally insignificant place; in 1622 there were more weavers than in Lavenham. It was just that Boxford was comparatively innocent of certain progressive facts of life.

The seasons blend and blur in the snug valley enfolding the village; its lovely church of St Mary grows lovelier, more mellow with the centuries. Population rose and fell, influenced by vicissitudes in the wool trade, and the Agricultural Revolution; until all of a sudden it was 1966 and Peter Hardiman Scott, BBC political editor at Westminster, came to live in Butchers Lane, at a time when he was obliged to share the unpolluted Suffolk air with 500 other souls. "Today," he says, "the population has almost tripled." Perhaps not the original of the new order of immigrants, he was certainly among the first wave, settling into a house dating from 1490. "New blood was necessary because new blood was the life-blood, the beginning of a re-growth from medieval times. Newcomers restore the fabric of a village, not the locals, who take their heritage for granted—that's true of Boxford or Manhattan." As President of the Boxford Society he recalls that committee members of this, and other societies, include only 5 per cent indigenous Boxfordians. "It's an agricultural village, yet it's not an agricultural village . . . 30 men used to work a harvest field, today one man sits isolated above that field in an air-conditioned combiner. Old George, who kept a pig in the back yard and brewed his beer, declaring himself a happy man, is dead."

George is dead; long live George! Is this what the immigrants want in these changing times, an action-replay of Merrie England? Times which change so speedily that "immigrant", "newcomer" as generic labels have been made obsolete by "yuppie". The Reverend Dr Peter Toon is Boxford's rector: "Yuppies are passionately attracted by a myth, the television commercial representation of a village life of strawberries and cream, Hovis, ponies in the paddock for the children. It's part of 19th-century romanticism extended, anti-city, poet-painters' country. So newcomers try to re-create the village in their own image."





Above left, a wedding at St Mary's church. The bride is Katharine Solomon, daughter of the village newsagent Eric, who moved to Boxford five years ago. She and the groom, falconer Peter Jarman hold his dogs on leads. The bridesmaid Christine is sister of the bride. Above, Lady Hilda and Dr Conrad Swan, modern-day lord and lady of the manor, in the grounds of Boxford House. Left, "a Boxfordian from 1887 would know precisely where he was".

If the rector sees the village in terms of an emotional mirage, his view of the living church is no more comforting. "Few come to church except for traditional festivals: marriage, baptism. They don't believe the baby is really alive until it's baptized. There's a genuine feeling for the building itself, the porch, the bells, but God Himself exists only in time of crisis and at Christmas, as part of a folk-religion. If God could comment, I think it would be a similar statement to when He looked down on the small towns of Judaea and Galilee at the times of King David and Solomon. He would probably say, 'Despite their prosperity and good living their hearts are far from me.'"

But are their hearts so divorced from Him when families like David and Coralie Brown and their 11-year-old daughter give much of their time to singing in the choir, to raising money to restore the bells which last sounded a full peal in 1924? They moved to Boxford eight years ago, living in a detached house currently worth about £70,000 on the Brook Hall estate, David commuting to his computer company in Colchester. David is chairman of the board of Boxford School governors, Coralie is secretary of the Community Council; she headed the committee organizing the Boxford Fête,



Ron and Britt-Marie Young who live with their three children and dogs at Peyton Hall.

renamed the Boxford "Fayre" this summer. In past years it was held on the rectory lawn. Entrance was a few pence, there was a coconut shy, putting, you bought home-made rhubarb jam, guessed the weight of a cake, rolled up your sleeves and loosened your tie.

This year the fayre was held in a marquee, a sort of mini Earls Court. There were craft stalls from all over the county, helicopter flights, a team of free-fall-parachutists came plummeting down. Entrance was £1. But somehow it didn't work, the anticipated crowds simply didn't materialize. Perhaps they felt you could watch people jumping out of flying-machines just as well from your own garden without putting on a clean collar and paying £1 to attend the fayre. Not for nothing the saying, "If you want to find a fool in Suffolk, you'll have to bring him with you."

"We didn't get the turn-out," admits Coralie. "There's no animosity from the old village, but they don't help. The attitude is that they're content to let us take over. If there's any resentment it's from locals of our age, 40-ish, they resent our success, but they simply haven't got the *go*. We're from lower-middle-class backgrounds, David didn't go to public school, but we're ambitious. We're yuppies, I don't see it as a derogatory term. We wear Barbours, green wellies; it identifies us. I wear a string of pearls at point-to-points, so does my daughter. It's our crowd, like a club.

"We really feel for the village. If someone doesn't fight we'll lose it for ever. We're not snobbish, we love the country and we love horses. This isn't an Old Etonian ghetto . . . I wonder if they'd revitalize the village as we do? They take their silver spoons for granted. Nothing we do is for show. If we want a bigger house, it's for the land for horses. I don't want to ride Lady Hilda's horses for ever."

They are good people, these Browns, and very caring. If Village England loses them, it will be Village England's loss. But what they have not yet realized is that traditionally Village England was controlled by the gentry, and villagers have always—even unconsciously—resisted their power. Now, though the gentry's power has declined, villagers have yet to interpret outside organizing influences as anything but manipulative intrusion.

'Newcomers restore the fabric of a village, not the locals, who take it for granted.'

Sykes and Flo Tricker are what you'd call ' local. At least, Sykes is; Flo's one of your immigrants really, having suffered the folly of being born at Groton, almost a mile away. Sykes, 77 years old, was a bricklayer, knowing everyone in the village. "I still know a few," he says. "Archie, the bus driver. Mrs Sore, she's 91; she does a little, rests a little. The others have gone away . . . or died," he adds gleefully. "The new people have taken over, which is all right, but they think we know nothing. You see, it's always been the fête to us, not a 'fayre'." Flo joins in: "We didn't go this year, it was £1. Never heard of such a thing. We'd like to hear the bells again, I remember them before 1924. But £1 a ticket!"

As the Browns are good sorts, so, too, are the Trickers; it's just that they're older and old people tend to slow down, to view change with caution. There is a story of a village ancient being interviewed by a slick young reporter. "You must have seen a lot of changes in your 96 years," said the newshound, licking his pencil. "Ay," replied the old boy, "and I've opposed every one of them." But the Trickers and their kin did their whack in their salad days of long ago, when they, too, were yuppies by another name, dancing to different melodies. After all, there's been a bowls club behind The Fleece for ages and ages; so too a playing field and a darts team. If you turn to page 31 of *Boxford From Old Photographs*, you'll see the Girl Guides Troop. There is nothing new when you come to think of it, except perhaps newness itself.

"Yes," agrees Lady Hilda Swan of Boxford House, a turreted affair erected in 1820 by the family of Kingsbury who—together with Whymark (Whymark's Garage today) and Rice (still butchering in Swan Street)—first appeared in the Parish Register in 1557. "Yes," says Lady Hilda, "there have always been blood-transfusions. In the last war several girls from the Women's Land Army married local men." Her husband, Dr Conrad Swan, who, as York Herald of Arms, has been in attendance upon the Queen on many state occasions, runs a summer language school for foreign students at the house. There are massive iron gates, a lawn marginally smaller than Salisbury Plain, and about as esoteric a variety of household pets as you'd meet at Whipsnade.

"This is *the* house of Boxford," says Dr Swan, "so a few might regard me as a squire figure. Old villagers occasionally drop in for a chat and a gossip. Newcomers are executive







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David and Coralie Brown with daughter Charlotte. "We really feel for the village. If someone doesn't fight we'll lose it for ever."



Rector Peter Toon with Mrs Jean Newble, after entertaining a group of Chicago Lutheran pastors and wives to tea in St Mary's church.

nomads, their companies move them on after three or four years. Those who stay become feudally-minded. Classless and unsnobbish, but they want to hunt, to own land. They're 20th-century Tudor types, from humble roots but longing for tradition, the revival of a heritage, although I don't imagine they'd vocalize about it like that."

What have we got so far? A village which in 20 years or so has increased in population from approximately 500 to 1,400, yet without defacing its visual identity. Apart from the clutter of wires, a Boxfordian from 1887 would know precisely where he was. A stream, the Box, still flows through Broad Street, rich as ever in medieval buildings of the vernacular style, some bearing intricate scrolls of the pargeter's tool. There is an inscrutable sense of continuity, the football team still advancing stalwartly into battle, as indeed it did in John Winthrop's time, according to an entry in his diary on March 4, 1617: 'Brand brak his leg at footebal'. Gerald Rice, descended from a long line of butchers, tells me that despite the inestimable miracle of micro-waves, Boxford is still a Sunday beef joint village: "Hot on Sunday, cold on Monday, mince on Tuesday."

True, there is a council estate as well as three "executive-type" estates of ascending socio-economic status. True, you can buy works of art from Laurimore Gallery and Victoriana from The Old Bakery antique shop. At Riddelsdell Garage you could become proud owner of an Isuzu or Subaru motor car from Japan but not, apparently, a British-made vehicle; and, while you can purchase pâté de foie gras and allied necessities from Boxford Stores, you are still obliged to make the safari to Ipswich or Colchester for the weekly shopping.

In other words, there are no revelations; and I believe that if you are in search of revelation, you may end up in a sociological cul-de-sac. Really, there is nothing new under the sun, only variations on an age-old theme; the same rule of thumb applying to Village England. Of course there is change; progress, whether we like it or not, is irresistible. Those of us who lament the good old days fail to recognize that those good old days were very often putrid. Quaint old cottages were quaintly rat-infested and damp, their inhabitants crippled by rickets and tuberculosis. Changes in these respects were blessings but, and this may come as a shock to successions of immigrants, they have not unrecognizably altered the profile of country character which, basically, is immutable. As newcomers would learn if they were patient, if they did their homework more thoroughly; if, in the words of Ernie Chick, landlord of The Swan and chairman of the village hall, "they counted up to 10 before diving in".

As the family up at Peyton Hall are counting. The Peytons, who owned the hall from the Middle Ages until the 1850s, have gone the way of all flesh. The Youngs—Ron, his Swedish wife Britt-Marie and their three children—have lived there for five years. Being ex-directory, at the end of a ¾ mile drive, enclosed within farmland and 16 acres of garden-woods, they give the impression of treasuring their privacy. Ron, at 41, epitomizes a rags-to-riches story: working class boy from Dagenham who started his own computer-software company, selling eventually to a public company, a workaholic who confesses that "it's one thing to own, another to enjoy" the house they loved at first sight. "It was part of the myth," he recalls, "the ambition to own the manor house, the ego-trip. I was brought up street-wise, wanting to become country-wise, so I joined one of the Boxford committees, but I couldn't sustain it and it didn't feel right. I felt let down because the village was groaning with people like me, so I gently pulled out.

"I don't need to be a pseudo folk-hero or a yuppie with the trappings. We could survive without Boxford. We didn't survey Boxford, but Boxford surveys us—it's been said that we keep to ourselves. It doesn't hurt, my pace of life is too fast, commuting to Liverpool Street, travelling abroad—but slowly I'm beginning to feel the rhythm of the country, the seasons. This is my second childhood.

"I'll become active in village affairs, but not yet. I'll still say no, for the right reasons. I'll do it fully, properly, or not at all. I sold my horse for the same reasons, but when there's time to feed it, groom it myself, exercise it as it should be exercised, I'll buy another horse. That's what I feel about my responsibility to the village."

He is quite unsentimental about Village England, as I suspect he feels unsentimental about the Urban England he left behind. In the country you have to prove yourself just as much as in the city, and in Suffolk you can do this with toughness. At depth there is a certain barbarity, and it would be unrealistic to expect more; there is not one law for the factory, another for the field, as is often romantically held. Rural jungles and asphalt jungles share a common law, as innocents discover to their cost. Only the by-laws are different, arguably more indulgent in country areas.

> 'The new people have taken over . . . it's always been the fête to us, not a fayre.'

The facile conclusion is that the fabric, the plumbing, of Boxford has never been in better shape. It has become fashionable to reside in olde worlde style, restoring beams, treating rising damp, vanquishing death-watch beetle. Whether this makes the New Boxfordians a nobler breed is another matter. The rector has suggested that they are re-creating the village in their own image; if this is true, then it is the very opposite of disinterest. There is also the question of expansion: where will it end?

The melancholy truth may be that we shan't have much say in the matter. We cannot go back, and the future may not be entirely of our own making; for the villagers of Boxford themselves are pawns in a grand and unfathomable strategy conducted in Whitehall, passed down the line to County Hall. The game drags on, but when it ends, the wheel will have turned full circle and New Boxfordians, like those who came before them, will be reminded that nothing has changed, that they, too, were born to do as they were told ○

The Gift



BEST OF FRIENDS

Godfrey Smith considers the emotional ties that bind us to the collection of jokers, nutters, boozers and bounders who support us on our journey through life.

A man without friends is like a tree without fruit: sad. He may be friendless for good reason, because he is a saint or rebel, artist or hermit; but most of us are not natural loners. We gather our friends as a boat accretes barnacles. Few human activities are quite so unwilled as the long, slow, random accumulation of those we want with us on life's pilgrimage. Small wonder that when we do pause to consider what friends we have, we are likely to find them a daunting array of oddities, an old curiosity shop of jokers and nutters, boozers and bounders.

There is something sinister about a man with an array of flawless friends. He is like a man with a set of perfect teeth: are they really his own? And what did he do with all the other ones? No, it is the very fallibility of our friends that makes them dear to us. As Cyril Connolly, most exasperating and exhilarating of friends himself, once remarked: old friends are hardly distinguishable from enemies.

Old friendships absorb jokes like that as an old cricket bat absorbs linseed oil. What might to the casual eye seem a gratuitous insult, is in truth a delicious compliment. I have an old friend who is one of our most seasoned newspaper editors. Sometimes, when the world seems black to him, he will telephone me. "Come and have lunch, old friend," he will say. "I don't feel like talking to anybody today, and I know you won't mind if I don't say anything." These close, silent, eloquent lunches seem to me true tests of long-mellowed friendship.

We have been friends for 40 years: first as servicemen, then as undergraduates, then as newspapermen. I don't believe that war in itself is particularly good at annealing friendship. Yet certain shared past ordeals provide scope for endless reprise between survivors.

I have another cherished old friend, who goes back even further. During the mean and shoddy 1930s, when there were $5 to the £1 and the bank rate stood at 2 per cent, our fathers commuted daily together to the City. We went to the same kindergarten in the London suburbs, and then to the fearful preparatory school run by the awesome Mr W. H. Manley. He swung the scale at a little over 18 stone. He had a puce face, liquorice eyes, and wavy, black, brilliantined hair. His voice sounded as if it had been smoked and then bubbled through gin. He beat the 100 little boys under his care at the slightest pretext, and threw shillings across the room to those giving right answers. His main enemy in life was constipation.

"Never be afraid to take a laxative, boys," he would boom. "If taken short in the street, approach the first respectable house you see, raise your hat, explain what has happened, and ask if you may use the lavatory. When you have done your business, raise your hat, thank the lady of the house, and leave sixpence for the maid." We learned to read and write in sub-arctic temperatures, hands purple with the cold, and no boy dared to spell or parse anything less than perfectly.

The modern notion of dyslexia seems to those of us who passed through Mr Manley's grim care too laughable to entertain. To this day Ken and I never meet without dwelling at least once on those dire, dead days beyond recall. Our lives since then have seemed downhill all the way. May 12 is not much of a day in our annals. The General Strike ended on it but nothing much else happened. It is by chance my



birthday; and I know beyond question that no May 12 will ever pass, while he can lift a pen, when Ken will not send me a birthday card in his immaculate, Manley-trained hand. It is that sort of friendship.

But, I hear my women readers complain, this is a tale told by one half of the human race, and the one, incidentally, denied the filigree pleasures of female friendship: its subtleties, its emotions, its nuances. I have a sister-in-law who, through some happy and fruitful years living with her family in France, missed only one thing dearly: the company of her English women friends. And it is a very real deprivation, for the friendship of women has a lightness, a delicacy, absent in the friendship of men. It is also far less discreet.

Women, being far less conceited than men, do not hesitate to reveal lacunae in themselves and their dear ones which would make their menfolk blench. I remember vividly a great banquet where I sat next to a lady whose husband was one of our country's most distinguished critics. In a matter of minutes I had heard that he did not care to take a bath, preferring to wash himself standing up, and had recently had all his teeth extracted. What further revelations would have followed had we sat longer I do not presume to contemplate.

I believe in *amitié amoureuse*, that loving friendship between a man and a woman that hovers deliciously in the unscripted space between probity and scandal: but not much, and not for long. The matter will soon wither or ripen into something more. The fascination lies in seeing how long the tenuous *tendresse* can be maintained. After all, the shadow play of *liaisons dangereuses* is acted out all around us every day. The chaste kiss we give the wives or husbands of our friends is surely part of a ritual dance in which we declare in mime that were things otherwise, then so would the kiss be: the bee's and not the moth's. In a way, it is astonishing that more of these miniature plays within the play do not mutate into something more.

When they do—when our friends divorce—it puts a new strain on those of us who cherish both erstwhile lovers. Shall we ask him for Christmas, and her for New Year's Eve? Or is it one of those amiable splits where they do not mind being invited to the same party? There are worse ordeals for those of us at the ringside. What is our attitude to the incoming partners to be? The problem is quite bad enough for us; but imagine the emotional hurdle for the new wife or husband, trying to make his or her way into the charmed circle so recently occupied by the partner displanted.

I remember visiting the house of a celebrated man who had been recently involved in an untidy and distressing divorce. His new young wife was our hostess that night, and had spared no exertion to make the evening a rousing success. The champagne flowed copiously, the food was generous, the company glittering. There was one thing, however, which she could not avoid. Everything in the room was new. Nothing was worn, nothing was shabby, nothing was old. It looked like a film set. And as for the props, so for the friends. They looked as if they had been assembled by Central Casting. They were all famous, every last Jack and Jill. There was no place here for those laggards who straggle along beside our waggon, and whom we love because of, not despite, the faults that stopped them leading the column. A room full of stars will not be a room full of friends.

I suppose Kenneth Tynan moved in the most star-studded circles of my generation. The most famous undergraduate since Oscar Wilde, he swam out of Oxford effortlessly into those wide oceans where the biggest fish lurk. "I have shot crap with Orson Welles and my bolt with Laurence Olivier," he signalled back to us



triumphantly, all of 22, in his first report from the outer world to our undergraduate magazine *Isis*. When he married, the matron of honour was Marlene Dietrich. His flat in Mayfair was a clearing-house for migrant megastars. But were they *friends*? Or would they melt away when the going got rough, like the Great Gatsby's, leaving only one faithful chronicler to mourn at his graveside?

No, it did not turn out like that; the great were there in droves at his memorial service in Covent Garden, and many of them paid eloquent tribute to him. "Your father," said Tom Stoppard at the end of his address, turning to Ken's children, "was part of the luck we had." Still, there is only one Tynan every 10 student generations, and most of us, if we are wise, will choose our friends for wear rather than tear, comfort rather than razzmatazz.

For famous friends do create special problems for us. When I look back at my Oxbridge generation, I remember one friend, now a great television tribune, cycling about the city on his old bicycle and eating too much ice cream. Which is the real Robin? Then there was Ronny, now chairman of a £600 million company, with whom I used to play college rugby every week. Is he still game for 4 pints each Saturday night, no more, no less—the sort of forward planning you expect from a future captain of industry—or has he become someone else? Or do the shared pints of yesteryear override all that has happened since?

We tread on dangerous ground here. Oxford—and Cambridge—are loved and loathed, not just because they have college autonomy, tutorial teaching, ancient fabrics, and priceless libraries, but because they are thought to have magic. To go there is to enter a charmed world which may never quite shake off its spell. Friendships made there may stand, not for the marriage of true minds, but the inexorable working of the old-boy network.

It is a serious charge, and needs a serious answer. The old-boy network is not to be confused with the old school tie, though those who wear the latter may belong to the former. No, the old-boy network, specifically and technically, was the wartime communications grid which enabled any unit in action to call up any other and ask for help. To be able to call a man at the other end of an army radio "old boy" meant you were already half way to doing by guess and by God what had not been done by the brass-hats at GHQ. In peace, though, it has gradually come to mean illicit or corrupt advantage exchanged between two people who have been at the same school or in the same regiment—a different kettle of fish altogether.

Now obviously a lot of this went on, notably in places like the wine trade and the Stock Exchange. It may still get you a seat; but it will not guarantee your ride. I suspect that our American and Common Market overlords give the network short shrift. A modern computer can work miracles; but it cannot tell the colour of your school tie, which counts for precisely nothing in the daily war which is the foreign exchange market—even though, paradoxically, OB or OM for Old Boy or Old Man are often the words which start on the telex to open the daily bidding.

You do not have to be rich to have friends. When George Orwell sought to expiate the guilt, as he saw it, of his upper-middle-class provenance, he acquired a suit of ragged clothes and sallied out to try his luck as a *soi-disant* member of the working class. Whereas before he had always been called sir or guv'nor, he was now on all sides called mate. It was, he testified, "a fine and hearty word".

The term survives, though now increasingly used by disc jockeys in self-deprecating jokiness ("it's your old mate again") and, tacked on to expletives, as a suffix of multiplied contempt ("Up yours, mate"). But the thing in itself survives too: the sense that working men must stand together in an ever more hostile world. Note the fury of miners or printers against the man who crosses the picket line and thus leaves the warm fraternity of his calling for good ("Scab!"). He is a mate no more.

When the British motor-racing ace, Mike Hawthorn, called his close friend and fellow driver "mon ami-mate" it was as if he were trying to modify the romance implicit in the French word with the ordinariness of the English one. The joke seeks to mask something not unlike unsexed love: "mon ami-mate" was written on Hawthorn's flowers when Ivor Bueb was killed racing. We were once less embarrassed: Winston Churchill called Raymond Asquith, the golden boy of Edwardian England, "my brilliant hero-friend". No Prime Minister, not even, I think, Margaret Thatcher, could get away with that now.

Yet we still require our friends to act roles for us: as raconteurs, claques, confidantes, comedians, psychiatrists, clairvoyants, comforters, gossips, legends. Such roles need not be conventional. Thus my dear old friend Peter survived miraculously when his RAF bomber crashed in the war. He thereupon vowed that to celebrate his deliverance, the rest of his life would be one long party. So far, he has faithfully kept his side of the bargain. He treats the minor hazards of middle age with the good-humoured contempt they deserve. He is, for example, quite unable to get his false teeth in each morning until he has downed the first pink gin of the day. It is the first of several.

Recently he was invited by his old friend, Chelsea neighbour and former *Express* colleague Donald Edgar to call one morning to hear him read extracts from his war memoirs. It would be a harrowing tale, for Edgar had survived a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. Alas, Peter overslept, and when he finally presented himself contritely at Edgar's flat was furiously shown the door. He rang me with the problem. I suggested that he should send round a sonnet and undertook to have a shot at writing it: "To Donald Edgar, on oversleeping an appointment to hear his memoirs"

O never say that I have lost a friend;
We two are comrades battle-scarred and bold.
In war we fought our fight until the end,
In peace of sorts we toiled for Beaver's gold.

I tried the skies above our English lands
And lived to drink the health of Peter Senn;
Your spirit was constrained by devil's hands,
And yet you write with that angelic pen.

The Street of Shame is now our only mart;
Its streams of ink the only blood we know:
If my late slumbers seemed to mock your art
I crave your pardon, friend of long ago.

Forgive, when you prepare a dish for gods
Your dozy chum. For even Homer nods.

"Worked like a charm, my dear," Peter enthused on the telephone next day. "At first I pretended I'd written it myself. Then I owned up. I told him I'd had it written by my sonneteer. My *private* sonneteer."

I relate this rum, though perfectly true, little yarn because it illustrates the bizarre and multifarious duties friendship may impose. And pleasures, of course: I walk every autumn with two friends over the Hampshire hills, where every acre is holy ground to us from our



schooldays. We are, I fear, the object of some derision to our children for so doing.

Hero-friends are thin on the ground. There are, for example, those friends whom we want to see, but only for a drink; others who are at their best over the four or five hours of a dinner party; those sterling chums we can ask for the weekend; and those rare spirits we will take on holiday with us. All friends are different, thank the Lord. Some strip the sheets for the wash; others neatly make the bed for the next occupant. I asked that great arbiter of contemporary *moeurs*, Jilly Cooper, whether she would pop friends into sheets recently vacated by previous friends. "Oh, yes," she said. "As long as they're nice *clean* friends."

If only they all were. But never mind, clean or grubby, they are part of us, as we of them. Jokers, nutters, boozers, bounders, famous and infamous, glamorous and moth-eaten, they are "mes ami-mates", and I love them all ○

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Queen Victoria's happy Christmases

A celebration of family life and Christian love, with present-giving round the tree, lavish feasts, yet charity to the poor, Queen Victoria's Christmas set the tone for future generations. By James Munson.

Throughout her life Queen Victoria attached great importance to Christmas. It united her most powerful sentiments: her devotion to Christian duty and her deep love for her husband, Prince Albert and for her family. The traditions which she initiated or developed have influenced generations ever since. Her diary, started at the age of 13 in 1832, was scrupulously maintained throughout her life, and provides a vivid insight into Christmases spent in the royal household.

From the first year of her diary the young princess conveyed the keen expectation and excitement of the present-giving rituals at Kensington Palace, where she was brought up—an only child—by her widowed mother the Duchess of Kent and her governess, Baroness Lehzen. On the morning of Christmas Eve she distributed her own gifts to staff such as her tutor, Dr George Davys; in the evening, after dinner, the Duchess rang a bell three times to summon the household into a room where the Princess saw "two large round tables on which were placed two trees hung with lights and sugar ornaments. All the presents being placed round the tree. I had one table for myself."

The giving and receiving of presents gave her enormous pleasure. She spent the last Christmas (1836) before she became Queen at Claremont, the Surrey home of her mother's brother, her Uncle Leopold, the first King of the Belgians. He gave her some of her favourite presents that year, such as autographs of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, his imaginative way of stimulating her interest in history. In the style of a true diarist, she had an eye for detail, which she liked to record precisely—from the length of her journey from Kensington to Claremont by carriage (1½ hours)

Queen Victoria's Christmas table at Windsor, 1850, showing her presents from her family. She and Prince Albert used to give each other paintings. Above left, royal Christmas, 1848.

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to presents given and received.

For example, her mother gave her jewels and two copies of *The Picturesque Annual for 1837*, a popular gift of the time featuring portraits of celebrated aristocratic ladies, often accompanied by sentimental poems written by them. Princess Victoria likewise gave her governess a copy and a green morocco jewel case, and to her mother she gave that characteristic Victorian gift, a bracelet made of her hair and of the locks of the Duchess's two children by her first marriage. As she grew older, Victoria would give her mother her own drawings, for she developed into a highly accomplished artist.

The highlight of the 1836 Christmas was a visit to a gipsy camp outside Claremont. Victoria went several times during the Christmas season and she persuaded her mother to send food, blankets and fuel. The Princess was worried about one gipsy's new-born baby and Baroness Lehzen was instructed to send a royal footman with a woollen jacket for the child. Victoria reflected in her diary: "I cannot say how happy I am that these poor creatures are assisted, for they are such a nice set of Gipsies, so quiet, so affectionate to one another, so discreet, not at all forward or importunate, and *so* grateful; so unlike the gossiping, fortune-telling race-gipsies . . . Their being assisted makes me quite merry and happy today, for yesterday night when I was safe and happy at home in that cold night and today when it snowed so and everything looked white, I felt unhappy and grieved to think that our poor gipsy friends should perish and shiver from want."

Victoria became Queen the following June, so she spent the next Christmas at Buckingham Palace, moving to Windsor on Boxing Day. Now she was able to indulge in all the pleasures denied her by a strict mother. Christmas could be celebrated in a truly regal fashion, yet she never forgot her Christian obligations to the poor. Every year gifts and food were distributed, sometimes by her children, usually in the riding school at Windsor.

It was Queen Victoria who set the tone of Christmas as we know it today, and not only in her generosity of spirit. Her love for her husband and children was reflected in the warm and hospitable mood of their Christmases, which became great family occasions. The royal example spread far beyond the confines of the court. The launching of magazines such as *The Illustrated London News*, which depicted the royal festivities, set a style that was copied in the homes of the growing middle classes throughout Britain, the Empire and America.

The tradition of Christmas cards started in Queen Victoria's reign, spawned by the introduction of the penny post which she did much to encourage. Yet towards the end of her reign she annually complained—as did her subjects, and as we do today—about the chore of sending them.

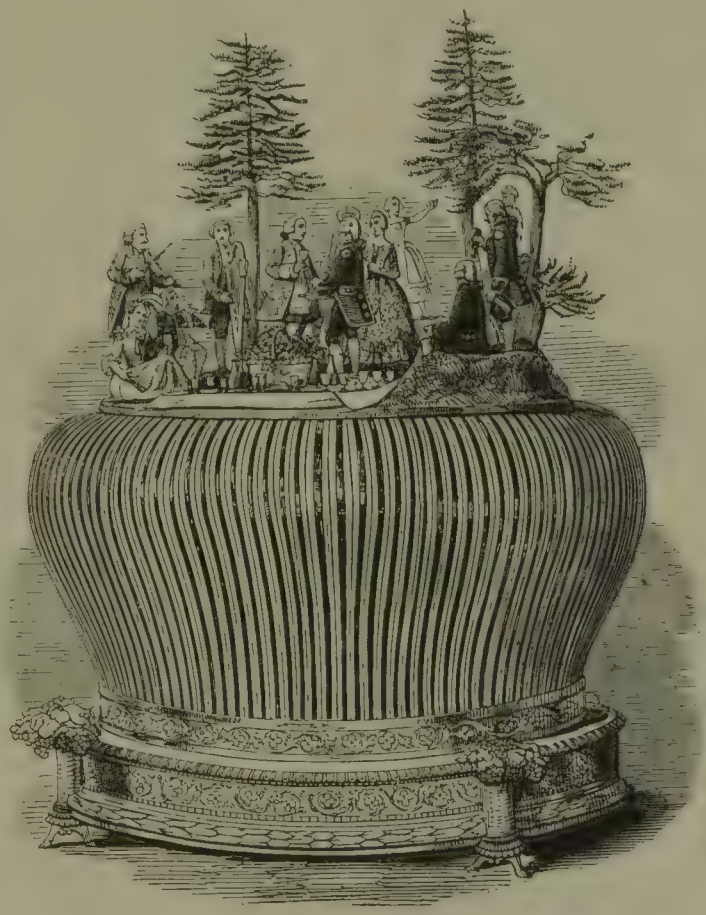
The arrival of the Christmas tree is often associated with her reign—Prince Albert is erroneously credited with introducing it from Germany. But the Queen had known this custom all her life: her grandmother, Queen Charlotte, had first brought it from Germany after her marriage to King George III in 1761. Victoria and Albert carried on the custom of decorating the tree with candles, wax dolls and strings of almonds and raisins.

Queen Victoria's most important Christmas was probably in 1840, two and a half years after her accession to the throne and the first of her married life. After their wedding in February, she and Prince Albert were already celebrating the birth in November of the first of their nine children. Prince Albert wrote to his brother from Windsor: "Christmas Eve we spent very pleasantly. Three Christmas trees adorned the hall and everyone was merry and happy. Next year the little daughter will jump around the tree, as we did not so very long ago."

Yet Victoria was always acutely aware of the degree to which Albert missed his home and family in Germany. Her encouragement of the Christmas tree and other German Christmas customs was designed to make her husband feel at home.

On Christmas Eve, 1842, the Prince wrote to his father, "This is the dear Christmas Eve, on which I have so often listened with impatience for your step, which was to usher us into the Gift-room. Today I have two children of my own to make gifts to." Albert noted the two royal infants "are full of happy wonder at the German Christmas-tree and its radiant candles".

The Christmas festivities at Windsor lasted for several days. On New Year's Eve a dance was held and at the stroke of midnight a flourish of trumpets was sounded as was the custom in Germany. This greatly moved the Queen for it "quite affected dear Albert, who turned pale, and had tears in his eyes and pressed my hand very warmly. It touched me too, for I felt that he must think of his dear native country, which he had left for me."



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The cake made for Twelfth Night at Windsor Castle, 1849. About 30 inches wide, it depicts an 18th-century fête champêtre*; its sides are decorated with gold paper.*

These German traditions fascinated the younger members of the court. One maid of honour, Eleanor Stanley, sent her mother a long account of Christmas at Windsor in 1847. From this we learn that all the household were invited to the Oak Room at about 7pm on Christmas Eve. There was a table with "a little fir-tree, in the German fashion, covered with bonbons, gilt walnuts, and little coloured tapers". She was able to take a bonbon to send as a gift to her sister.

Piled round the tree were presents, each with a slip of paper giving the recipient's name written by the Queen. Eleanor Stanley received a gold chain which held a heart-shaped locket decorated with diamonds. The gentlemen of the household also received jewels such as pearl studs. (This would always be one of Victoria's favourite gifts for the men in her service.) All were given various engravings of the Queen and her family as well as the almanacs, which were still popular. There was now Nuremberg gingerbread, another German touch.

After seeing their own presents, the household moved in a procession to see the tables adorned with presents exchanged within the royal family. The Queen and the Prince had given the Duchess of Kent life-sized statues of two of their daughters. Victoria and Albert also established the tradition of giving each other specially commissioned paintings to add to the art collection which was one of Albert's main interests. The children were encouraged to give Christmas cards of their own making.

On a typical Christmas Day there would be a short service with a carol and hymn and the traditional feast. Christmas cards were reserved until Boxing Day when they were handed round or delivered by a footman. Food seems to have been a major feature: the permanent kitchen staff numbered 45 by the 1890s



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and this did not include the Indian servants whose sole duty was to prepare the curry—which few ate—served at every lunch.

The sheer scale on which the meals were prepared staggers our modern imagination and has much more in common with the 15th than with the 20th century.

Lord Torrington, an equerry, records his visit in 1860 to the famous Windsor kitchens where he was allowed to watch the Christmas feast being prepared. There, roasting before the fires, were at least 50 turkeys along with geese, a boar's head and a baron of beef weighing 360lb. The Lord Lieutenant of Ireland had sent his customary present of a woodcock pie containing 100 birds.

Here is the traditional recipe for Windsor Mincemeat. Would-be imitators are warned that the following ingredients make 675lb: 82lb currants, 30lb orange peel, 30lb lemon peel, 30lb cedrat (citron peel), 2lb cinnamon, 1½lb allspice, 1½lb cloves, 1½lb nutmeg, ½ sugar loaf (about 7lb), 24lb Lisbon sugar (caster sugar), 120lb minced beef, 120lb suet, juice of 25 lemons, 4 bushels peeled and cored russet apples, 4 bushels Bramley apples, 24 bottles brandy.

All the dry ingredients were mixed and then put through a coarse grinder after which the lemon juice and brandy were added.

The lavish preparations took into account not only the royal household, but workers on the royal estates, who were given a shoulder of lamb, and special friends, who were sent large raised pies. These involved an immense amount of work. They were made of turkey, chicken, pheasant and woodcock, each of which had to be boned. In addition there was a stuffing of forcemeat, truffles and tongue. The woodcock was put inside the pheasant, the pheasant inside the chicken and the chicken inside the turkey. The turkey was then packed round with stuffing and a rich pastry made so that when the pie was sliced each piece had the flavour of each of the birds used. For the kitchen staff there was not only turkey, plum pudding, mince-pies and roasted chestnuts but roast cygnet.

The court still kept up the English tradition of Twelfth Night on January 6: on one occasion a Greek play was translated into German with music by Mendelssohn, the Queen and Prince's favourite living composer. Albert himself was a talented composer and among his works was a new setting of the Christmas hymn, "Hark! the herald angels sing".



ILN PICTURE LIBRARY

Roasting the baron of beef on a spit in the kitchens of Windsor Castle, 1887. Food for Christmas was prepared here on a lavish scale.

One Christmas the Prince selected Haydn's Toy Symphony for performance. As the symphony proceeded, members of the court glanced at the Duke of Wellington. He was already quite deaf and was falling asleep. No one knew what to do at the end until the Duchess of Kent went over to the great hero and repeated in his ear, "It is all over, Duke."

On Twelfth Night the court had a special "Twelfth Cake" after which they would play a game of grabbing raisins from a dish of burning brandy, "the gentlemen being by far the most timorous" notes Eleanor Stanley. The game ended when someone threw salt on to the dish which produced a yellow flame giving everyone in the room a peculiar appearance.

Queen Victoria always enjoyed planning special presents for Prince Albert and she spent large amounts of money and time on them. When her children married, she carried on the tradition of arranging special gifts for them. Her eldest daughter, "Vicky", married the heir to the German throne. In her letters home the Princess would often suggest some work of art she wanted as a Christmas gift. The Queen also sent gifts to remind her of home, including huge pieces of cold beef. This delighted Vicky's father-in-law, the German Emperor, who declared British beef far superior to anything Germany could boast.

In 1860 the royal family was, as usual, at Windsor for Christmas: no one could guess that it would be Victoria and Albert's last one together. The Queen and Prince Albert were delighted at the engagement of their second daughter, Princess Alice, to Prince Louis of Hesse. In her euphoria Victoria gave permission for the Prince of Wales to smoke as long as "he does not do so in public or in the house".

Lord Torrington kept the editor of *The Times* informed about court gossip, and wrote enthusiastically about the festivities. "I have never seen a much more agreeable sight." As before, the Queen's three private sitting-rooms had Christmas trees which were so large that they were hung from the hooks normally used for chandeliers. In addition there were smaller trees on the tables. In one room the tables held all the presents, which were exchanged within the family on Christmas Eve. "It was royalty putting aside its state and becoming in words, acts, and deeds one of ourselves—no forms and not a vestige of ceremony." Lord Torrington concluded his frank account: "I never saw more real happiness than the scene of the mother and all her children: the Prince Consort lost his stiffness and your Windsor special had much cheerful and friendly conversation with them both."

This "real happiness", which Lord Torrington described, vanished in 1861 with the deaths first of the Duchess of Kent and then, only 11 days before Christmas, of Prince Albert. The Queen wrote to her eldest daughter in Prussia, "I never thought of Christmas and put all those recollections . . . away from my mind."

Henceforth Christmas would be spent at Osborne, away from the memories that now haunted the castle. Windsor became the venue for the annual service at the Royal Mausoleum, Frogmore, on December 14, the anniversary of the Prince's death. Two years later she wrote, "Christmas was as sad as possible." Even so, Victoria's naturally buoyant spirits steadily reasserted themselves and by 1872 she was personally supervising the erection of two Christmas trees and the buying and distribution of presents for up to 300 servants.

Victoria's Christmas celebrations suffered a further blow in 1878 when her daughter Princess Alice died on the same date as Prince Albert—"the dreadful fourteenth"—and there was a renewal of sad associations. "Ever since 61 it has been clouded over

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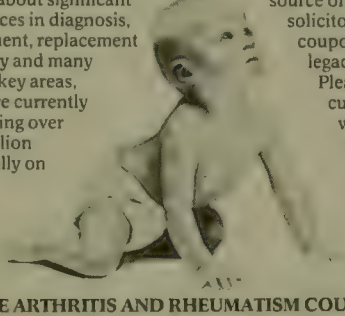
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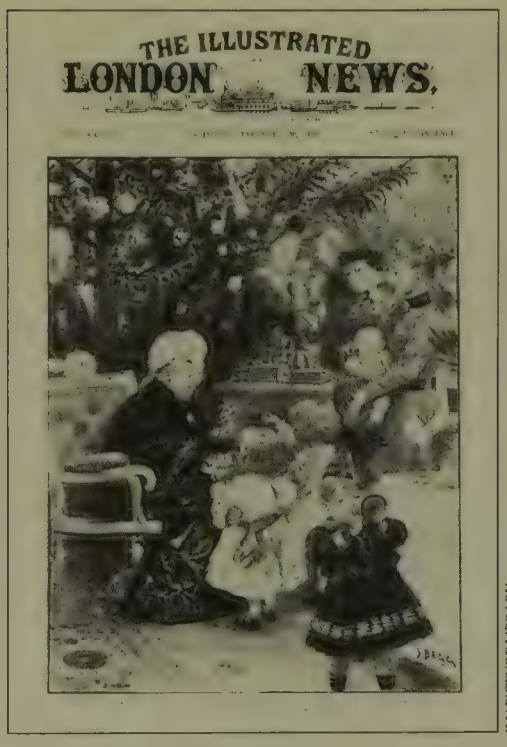
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ILN cover, 1899: Queen Victoria distributes gifts from her Christmas tree to wives and children of soldiers in the Boer War.

and totally altered. . . I cannot do many things again." When writing to her eldest daughter she quoted Tennyson's "In Memoriam" (a poem she read constantly):

The Yule log sparkled keen with frost,
No wing of wind the region swept,
But over all things brooding slept
The quiet sense of something lost.

Her ebullient spirits returned and Christmas became by the 1890s a high point at a court which younger members now regarded as "dull". In 1894 there were *tableaux vivants* (which Victoria personally supervised) and, as always, vast amounts of food. She was surrounded by courtiers, their spouses and children and her own children and grandchildren.

Bernard Mallet, whose wife, Marie, was a lady-in-waiting, watched on Christmas Eve as the Queen, now in a wheelchair, handed presents to the household. Marie was given "a case of large silver gilt spoons, the usual pocket book and some odds and ends, including a man of gingerbread" thereby keeping up the custom introduced by Prince Albert so long ago. Bernard was given a silver pin. After the Queen and Princesses withdrew to examine the royal presents on display in another room, the household "fell on the tree and divided the spoil, filling waste paper baskets!".

Even in the last years of her life Queen Victoria demonstrated her concern for others at Christmas. During the worst days of the Boer War in 1899, when the 80-year-old Queen felt "low and anxious", she broke with tradition and stayed at Windsor to put on a Christmas tea for the wives and children of soldiers at the front. Members of the royal family and courtiers helped to serve at table. The Queen recorded in her diary: "I was rolled up and down round the tables, after which I went away for a short while to have my own tea, returning when the tree was beginning to be stripped, handing myself many of the things to the wives and dear little children."

Barons of beef roasting on a spit, enormous Christmas trees laden with presents, mince pies in sufficient number to feed almost 700 people, Nuremberg gingerbreadmen, Christmas cards: all these went to make up a royal Christmas at Queen Victoria's court. But whether in the "happy years" before 1861 or in the long years of her widowhood, Christmas was always much more. It was a celebration of family life and of Christian love which Victoria extended as a girl to gipsies and as an old woman to the lonely wives of her soldiers. The legacy of her Christmas lives on ○

James Munson is the co-author of a recent book, Victoria: Portrait of a Queen, *published by the BBC in conjunction with his seven-part series on Queen Victoria broadcast on Radio Four this summer.*

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PRESS FOR ACTION

LADY OF THE FLOWERS

Mary Grierson is one of the greatest living flower painters whose admirers border on the passionate. Interview by Elisabeth Dunn



Tradescant's Spiderwort named after the two 17th-century gardeners celebrated in An English Florilegium *by artist Mary Grierson, opposite.*

There is a hillside in Elstree where pasque-flowers once grew. Without them, Mary Grierson might never have painted another plant. Shortly after the war Miss Grierson, a young map-maker and former WAAF, was living in Elstree and one day in early April she had a friend staying with her: "Let's go out and look at the *Anemone pulsatilla*," said her friend, this being the sort of conversation that botanists make after a heavy lunch.

"We went through a little wood," Miss Grierson recalls, "and here was this hillside *covered* with these beautiful purple pasque-flowers, Easter flowers. There were so many of them, I said: 'Do you think I might pick just one and see if I can paint it?' Which I did and made rather a bad job of it. I've never forgotten it. It put the brush back in my hand—because I'd dropped it during the war. So that was really rather nice. A year or two later I went back to have another look at these lovely things and, do you know, they had all disappeared. They'd sprayed the lot with pesticide and the whole hillside was gone."

Such is the fragility of Mary Grierson's world. She is, by common consent in the close and comfortable circles of botanical art, one of the greatest living flower painters, and her admirers border on the passionate. She popped into Spink's one day where her paintings were on show: "There was this nice gentleman there—very handsome, dark and all the rest of it. Bit of foreign blood, I should think. I was introduced to him and he took me by the hand and said: 'Oh, Miss Grierson, I'm so pleased to meet you. Let me kiss the hand that does this beautiful work,' and all this stuff. I didn't have the heart to tell him I was left-handed and he was kissing the wrong hand."

Mary Grierson's gifted left hand has recently been engaged on 150 paintings for *An English Florilegium*, at £75 a copy, the pearl of Thames & Hudson's current catalogue. Approached by the publisher to paint 50 pictures of English flowers, Miss Grierson was initially reluctant to undertake the proposal. She was working in Hawaii on scientific drawings at the Pacific Tropical Botanical Gardens; there was the prospect of a visit to the flora of China and she was not at all sure she could manage a bookful of paintings. Then the China project fell through, she returned to London and Thames & Hudson's commission became a working possibility.

Now Mary Grierson is a practical and, as her profession suggests, a down-to-earth woman and the concept of 50 English flowers of her own choice seemed a little inconsequential. Would there not be more point, she ventured to the publisher, in having a theme? Should she not do a series of paintings of the plants introduced by the Tradescants, father and son, the innovative and imaginative gardeners and plantsmen of the 17th century? The man from Thames & Hudson said he had never heard of them. "Well, it's about time you did," said Miss Grierson. *An English Florilegium*, then, is a

PORTRAIT BY RIC GEMMELL



celebration of the work of the Tradescants, published, thoughtfully, on the 10th anniversary of the Tradescant Trust, preservers of the Museum of Garden History in Lambeth.

The Tradescants were both horny-handed tillers of the soil and gardening intellectuals. In their lifetimes, between 1570 and 1662, they collected and nurtured plants from all over the known world and gave their name to two species: *Tradescantia virginiana* and *Aster tradescantii*. John Tradescant the Elder emerges, from William Stearn's learned introduction to the book, as an obsessive collector. Having gardened vigorously, travelled extensively in the service of the aristocracy and narrowly avoided death in the Duke of Buckingham's disastrous military expedition to La Rochelle to relieve besieged French Protestants, he retired to a house in Lambeth and became the curator of his own museum, "Tradescant's ark of novelties".

The museum was catalogued by the younger Tradescant, listing "divers sorts of Birds, foure-footed Beasts and Fishes" and a Dodo. This, or at least its head and a leg, can now be found in Oxford thanks to the cunning of the lawyer, Elias Ashmole. Ashmole drew up a contract and Tradescant, "befuddled with drink", signed over his entire collection on which the lawyer was able to build his own immortality.

Mary Grierson confines herself to the Tradescants' horticultural activities and it seems entirely appropriate that she should have inherited their concern to record the species before they become casualties of evolution. Her paintings are on show at Spink's until November 27. Interspersed with the Tradescants' domesticated introductions (and it takes Miss Grierson's particular power of observation to draw out the poetry in a runner bean) are paintings of the wild flowers which would have spattered the meadows and hillsides of the 17th century, as they do today. None of the wild flowers is a rarity, for Miss Grierson would rather die than pick a spring gentian. The experience of Elstree has made her a serious conservationist.

"There's another case in point," she says. "Out beyond Ayot St Lawrence there was a lovely area of chalkland with beautiful things like Traveller's Joy and orchids and cowslips and wild strawberries—all the lovely chalk things. It was a joy to go there; and blow me down if they didn't put a pine-tree plantation on it and the whole lot disappeared. It's ignorance, I suppose. Fancy putting pine trees on chalk. You can call it greed, if you like."

Yet much of Mary Grierson's source material remains abundant. It is not hard to imagine her in tweed cape and serviceable shoes, prodding about in the hedgerows like Margaret Rutherford's Miss Marple on the scent of a clue, bringing back to her studio the trophies of the hunt—oak apples and cobnuts and sycamore keys. She likes to take her holidays on Portland Bill despite warnings from a cousin that all the place offered was a prison, a naval station and a lighthouse: "Of course, it's beautiful," she says. "Like a garden, and you get a lovely light which must come off the limestone. Isn't it extraordinary how people can go out for a walk and just not *see* things?"

Mary Grierson has been going out for walks and seeing things since her childhood in the 1920s at Bangor in North Wales: "We used to go climbing in the mountains at weekends. We had everything—the coast, the mountains, the sea and sand at Anglesey. We could find bee orchids—which really *was* a find—and, being schoolgirls, we egged each other on. I was a dunce at school. Botany was the only thing I was any good at."

'I was a dunce at school. Botany was the only thing I was any good at.'

She was encouraged to pick up the brush by her mother who painted in oils. Mary herself never cared for the smell and she inclined more towards watercolour. On leaving school she went to a family in Germany for a year to teach the children English and discovered on her return to Bangor that her mother had enrolled her for a course in domestic science: "I said, 'What did you want to do that for? I know how to boil a cabbage.'"

Mrs Grierson, however, had a profound belief in written qualifications and, in the course of time, her daughter found herself, fully certificated, at work in the high-class confectioner, Sandbach of Llandudno. The anxiety occasioned by her first wedding cake remains with her to this day. Her father, a businessman in Bangor, died when Mary was in her late 20s. She and her mother moved to Dumfries where her grandfather owned a dyeing and weaving mill. It flew its own flag over the gates with the motto: "We dye to live and we live to die."

When war broke out, Grierson joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force at the recruiting centre in Bridgnorth, Shropshire. From there, she was posted to "No 6 BC". "I thought, being very keen, Bomber Command. Marvellous. It turned out to be a balloon centre outside Birmingham."

Here she began to draw maps for civil defence and, showing a certain aptitude for the work, she was recommended for photographic interpretation—that is, counting the ships and aircraft in the aerial pictures of enemy territory brought back by Spitfire pilots. For this, she was posted to Medmenham on the Thames in Buckinghamshire.

With the end of the war, she returned to Dumfries to nurse her mother through her final illness. After her mother's death, Miss Grierson saw no reason to remain in a small Scottish town and she moved south. She rejoined colleagues from Medmenham who had set up the Hunting Group of Aerial Surveys in the business of making maps: "It's a very good training for scientific drawing," she says. "When you draw a contour, it has got to join up, hasn't it?"

In the course of their surveys, the Group's fliers would bring back samples of obscure and mysterious flora from the Middle East and it fell to Mary Grierson, who was librarian and self-styled dogsbody, to take the specimens along to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew for identification. "Then I used to illustrate their reports for them. You know what it's like when you want to get a business going—everybody puts their shoulder to the wheel."

It was here, leafing through the Sunday papers, that Miss Grierson's eye fell upon a photograph of the artist John Nash presiding over a botanical art class at Flatford Mill. "I thought, 'Wouldn't it be marvellous to go and do that?' Something quite beyond the realms of possibility.

"But I must have said it aloud, because one of the surveyors said: 'Well, you draw our reports for us. Why don't you go down and do it for a week?' So the firm paid for me and that really got me going. John Nash was thrilling. He was simply so encouraging, you wanted to do your very best for him." Flatford Mill was, until quite recently, an annual event in Miss Grierson's life, first as a student and in later years as tutor.

It was while she was there in 1958 that she was invited to apply for the post of botanical illustrator at Kew: "I asked John Nash what I should do about the letter and he said: 'Well. Answer it.' So I went from one interview to another. Not meaning to get the job at all. I just wanted to find out what standard of work I was doing. Nobody was more surprised than myself when I got it."

She stayed at Kew for 12 years. She quotes John Nash on the science of botanic illustration: "It is a branch of flower drawing where the botanist rules supreme and the artist can take few liberties." She learned, during consultations with the academics at Kew, to count stamens and observe precisely the shape of petals: "If you guess at something, they're sure to find out."

That exactness of detail followed her after she left Kew. She may take the very occasional artistic liberty these days, now that she is a freelance painter and not shackled to the academic demands of the botanical discipline, but her pictures are ecologically correct. When she includes a magpie moth, it is in its natural grazing territory.

She has had three one-woman shows at Spink's. She has painted the plants of the Sinai Peninsula for the Israeli government; she has been given irises from Turkey to plant in the border outside her flat in Richmond. Each of her plants has a personal history.

Among the ladies of Richmond, where she moved when the drive between Elstree and Kew became too gruelling, she is as well known for her needlework as for her botanical drawings (which won her an honorary degree at Reading University a couple of years back and several gold medals from the Royal Horticultural Society). She has stitched the chimneys of Hampton Court in faultless blackwork (embroidery worked in black thread on white material); her collage of a Scottish loch, shortly to go on exhibition in Twickenham, fools the eye into watching for a flash of wet sunlight on a ripple. Similarly, in looking at her paintings of wild flowers, there is a temptation to put them in water before they wilt.

In his text for the *Florilegium*, William Stearn borrows a quotation to encapsulate the work of the Tradescants and it stands as an equally suitable epigraph to the paintings of Mary Grierson: "And thus Have I finished this worke, and furnished it with whatsoever Art and Nature concurring, could effect to bring delight to those that live in our Climate, and take pleasure in such things." ○

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MOUNTAIN FEVER

Ronald Faux reports on the challenges of the world's highest peaks, which some climbers choose to meet without oxygen, thus adding to the risks and to current controversy.



It is the most dangerous game. Formula One car drivers, powerboat crews and other competitors in "high risk" sports face dangers that are short-lived, immediate, and engineered through speed. In the painful and laboriously slow world of high-altitude mountaineering, danger is a constant for weeks on end; implicit in the steep, unstable structure of the snow, ice or rock, in the thin atmosphere which surrounds the climbers and in the mercurial storms and intense cold of high altitude. The challenge is to explore where the human body was never designed to survive.

If Everest and its mighty neighbours had been, say, 2,000 metres higher, their summits would probably have been beyond the reach of human endurance. At 8,000 metres they are tantalizingly within reach. Yet the record of success by British expeditions in the 1970s was marred in the 1980s by tragic accidents as more climbers began to apply the technique of fast, lightweight ascents used in the Alps to the formidably higher mountains of the Himalayas.

There were some spectacular near-misses, including the Bonington-Scott descent from the Ogre, Bonington with broken ribs, Scott with a broken leg. The tragedies have included the disappearance of Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker on a lightweight attempt on the unclimbed north-east ridge of Everest, and the disaster last year on K2, the second highest mountain in the world, when 13 climbers died in a catalogue of disasters.

The mountaineering establishment is seriously concerned. The Mount Everest Foundation, set up to support mountain exploration on the proceeds of the first successful attempt in 1953, has sounded the warning. George Band, chairman of the MEF and president of the Alpine Club, clearly believes the line between the challenge implicit in mountaineering and the unjustifiable risks required by small-scale expeditions to high and serious peaks is crossed too often.

"What happened on K2 was absolutely horrifying," he says. "We do appeal to climbers to take more care, particularly on small expeditions which simply do not have the human resources to provide back-up when things go wrong. If oxygen sets are not being used high on an 8,000 metre peak when the weather breaks down, then the consequences may obviously prove grave."

As a climbing team gains altitude, acute mountain sickness can be a hazard among even the fittest members and at relatively low altitudes. Headaches, nausea, vomiting and excessive tiredness are the warning signs that a climber should go no higher until the symptoms cease. Excessive breathlessness, coughing that produces froth or blood-tinged sputum and bubbling in the chest—signs of pulmonary oedema—are signals for immediate descent. Cerebral oedema is indicated by changes in character, loss of consciousness or coma.

Physical deterioration starts at about 5,000 metres and accelerates at greater altitude. The higher you are the worse it gets so that above

Reinhold Messner, the first man to climb all the world's 14 peaks over 8,000 metres, has pioneered climbs without oxygen. Inset: Everest expeditions using oxygen. Bottom, the first successful expedition in 1953. Top, at around 6,000 metres, on the 1972 British Everest Expedition.

BOTTOM: CHRIS BONINGTON/ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

6,000 metres increasing physical and mental disorder mean that time is limited. Dehydration becomes a serious hazard. Climbers must consume at least 1½ litres of liquid a day. Some medical authorities say 3 litres. Appetite dies away at altitude and during a two- to four-day summit-bid climbers may be virtually starving while working at maximum effort. Ability to withstand this onslaught on the system comes only through training and experience.

But the phenomenal record of Reinhold Messner, the Italian mountaineer, has set the example which ambitious climbers seek to follow. Several have already lost their lives trying.

Messner climbed Everest twice, both times without bottled oxygen and once alone. He went up Nanga Parbat twice: during the first climb his brother perished in an avalanche; during the second ascent he went alone and the mountain was struck by an earthquake. Last year he became the first man to climb all 14 peaks in the world more than 8,000 metres high. He has proved to a new generation of climbers that the use of supplementary oxygen may not be necessary, that even the highest peaks can be climbed "pure" without artificial aid.

Ironically enough, Messner insists it was the experience of the first Everest explorers which convinced him it should be possible to climb to the highest altitudes unencumbered by oxygen cylinders. For one thing, the equipment taken on the Everest expeditions in the 1920s probably required more energy to carry than it yielded.



Reinhold Messner believes the use of oxygen "lowers the summit".

The early explorers in their stout boots and windproofs which would not have looked out of place on a bad day in the Malverns achieved wonders of high-altitude endurance. Professor Noel Odell spent days at more than 8,000 metres—what Messner refers to as the "death zone"—searching for Mallory and Irvine in 1924 and went on to live well into his 90s. The dangers of oxygen starvation were not properly understood but the pioneers suffered no ill effects. After he had survived the first ascent of Everest "without oxygen", Messner reflected on the various ills that could afflict anyone following his example: lungs could fill with fluid, eyeballs burst, or brain damage ensue.

It was Clive James, reviewing the achievement on television, who acidly reflected that in Messner's case this would amount to further brain damage. The layman has trouble grasping the sense of challenge which drives the modern mountaineer to climb with the minimum of equipment.

Messner and the anti-oxygen faction argue that there is little point in climbing a mountain if it is necessary to employ artificial means. They claim that using oxygen on Everest is tantamount to lowering the summit. Exactly the same argument was used in the 1920s by the organizers of the early Everest explorations who thundered from their armchairs that it would be morally wrong to use oxygen.

The latest attempt on the north-east ridge of Everest this autumn has been by a team who also eschew bottled oxygen. Rick Allen, co-leader with Doug Scott, had reached beyond 8,000 metres in a solo bid after the British team in spring 1986 had withdrawn. He felt convinced that given good weather and reasonable snow conditions the elusive ridge could be climbed in "lightweight" style. Steve Sustad, a young climber with an impressive record in the Himalayas, went further by declaring that to use the siege tactics and oxygen gear of the first Everest climb would be almost immoral. "There is a limited number of unsolved problems left in the Himalayas. If we use over-the-top methods we are going to remove all the risk and the excitement and be left with no future for mountaineering," he said.

Chris Bonington, leader of many Himalayan expeditions in alpine, lightweight and siege style, has an open mind about the "to breathe or not to breathe" dilemma. He led the lightweight attempt on the north-east ridge in 1982 when Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker disappeared and may lead another British team to the ridge, possibly in spring 1989. This would unashamedly use oxygen sets. "If you manage to climb a route on a high mountain without oxygen then it is a greater achievement, no doubt about it. But to extend that to suggesting that no expedition should have the right to go on to Everest with oxygen is being rather élitist.

"Only fairly exceptional climbers can reach the summit of Everest and K2 and get back down again safely, therefore it is plainly ridiculous to suggest that unless you are one such climber you should have no right to go there. But when people go there without oxygen, it is important that they should be aware of the risks they are running and the commitment they are making. Inevitably some people are going to make that choice who are not up to it and will get themselves killed because of it. That in my opinion is part and parcel of climbing."

Bonington now thinks that the north-east ridge presents a unique problem because so much of its length is above 8,000 metres. He says, "Pete Boardman and Joe Tasker were amply qualified to go for Everest without oxygen. They were very good mountaineers with superb mountain judgment. But by the time anyone has climbed over the Pinnacles to the point where the north-east and the north ridges join, I would be surprised if they have the strength to carry on the last mile or so to the top without oxygen sets. I prefer small expeditions, but each objective needs an appropriate force and I reckon the north-east ridge lends itself to a large team.

"The successful attempts in the Himalayas have been by the 16- to 20-strong east European teams using fixed ropes and working together as a team and climbing the big, technically difficult routes—the south face of Lhotse for example. Mind you, as the lightweight expeditions improve their technique, knowledge and equipment, I have no doubt they will be able to do more and more extraordinary things that would inhibit a heavyweight expedition," Bonington said.

One calculation is that six in every 100 climbers who set out on Himalayan expeditions lose their lives. More than 80 climbers have died on Everest. The Eiger in the Alps and Nanga Parbat have each claimed 50 lives—seven climbers and nine porters were buried in their tents by an avalanche on Nanga Parbat in 1937. The previous year four climbers and five porters with another German expedition had also been lost. A Japanese expedition to Gocher San in 1979 lost six climbers and the same number of a strong Indian Army expedition to Everest in 1985 died on the mountain. K2 has been the scene of some 26 accidental deaths, 13 of them last year alone.

The main cause of climbing fatalities in the Himalayas is not physical sickness but the objective danger concealed in the steep slopes of snow and ice or in crevasses covered by a fragile sheet of snow. Avalanches, fierce and barely predictable, are the most frequent killers. They may be triggered by changes in temperature or direction of the wind, by vibration or without apparent reason other than fate.

The Mount Everest Foundation and the Union Internationale des Associations d'Alpinisme (UIAA) seem less concerned with combatting these objective dangers than by the way that altitude affects the human body. The Mountain Medicine Data Centre of the UIAA has calculated that there is a 6 per cent mortality rate on UK expeditions to peaks over 7,000 metres. Their guidelines point out that few teams can expect to operate at full strength at high altitude and often only half the numbers may be completely fit at any one time.

With so many horrific risks lurking behind the grandeur of high mountains, why do climbers persist in exploring them in small expeditions that increase the odds against them? Most climbers who graduate to this level of the sport know the risks and guard against them. They will probably know people who have perished in climbing accidents but balancing their own skill and experience against the objective will decide whether for them the risk is justified. Most expeditions return safely after a challenging and immensely rewarding adventure. As one old Himalayan expedition hand said: "Climbing is a game without rules—just make sure you don't break any of them." ○

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LAURIE LEE'S CHELSEA

Laurie Lee, who has lived in Chelsea since the war, records it before and after it became London's fashionable hub.



JILL FURMANOVSKY

Laurie Lee at the Chelsea Arts Club, which he joined 40 years ago and has frequented ever since.

When my mother sensed that the time had come for me to leave home, she suggested, half way between a giggle and a sigh, that I might do worse than go and live in Chelsea. She was a country girl, had never strayed far from her roots, but to her, a great reader of romantic novelettes, Chelsea was a place of high-tone fantasy, of bearded genius, swooning beauties, and garlanded studios overhanging the river.

I'd only thought of Chelsea as a football team and a currant bun, but I took Mother at her word, believing I was carrying out some secret instruction, and when I set out to see the world I settled in Chelsea towards the end of the war and have lived there, on and off, ever since.

I began with a bed-sit in Markham Square, the top-floor window commanding a history of the time. My friend and landlord was the Keeper of the Public Records Office, a cultured and careful man, who, in order to save fuel, went to bed at sundown and read Proust by the light of a saucerful of glow-worms sent up from the country in jam jars.

Chelsea, then, had no cars, few people, and vast empty skies enlivened only by steam from Battersea Power Station. The King's Road had curled old ladies selling needles and thread, workmen's cafés serving kipper-teas for a shilling; upside-down butcher's shops, with meat hanging under the counter; and dairies with china eggs and cardboard cows decorating otherwise empty shelves.

I don't suppose Chelsea differed, in this regard, from anywhere else at that time, but it had that distinguishing presence my mother's instinct had promised, and Markham Square certainly was a compact little enclave of oddities, a fringe gathering of painters, poets and muses.

Half-way through the morning I'd see Dylan Thomas, like a plump, furry little mole, pop up from his basement opposite and go padding off to the pub. If we met in the street we didn't speak, but nodded. I was teetotal in those days, and certain lines were drawn. Two doors to my left lived the incomparable James Cameron, and we used to play the violin and guitar together. Not well; but those were days of no discos and little public entertainment, and sometimes we hired an old pony and trap and toured the streets in a selfless attempt to enrapture the populace.

Farther up, Elizabeth Smart, her face emblazoned with light, mothered the happy brood of George Barker's children; while across the square, issuing nervously from some mysterious recess of his own, the poet Paul Potts, a tall, stooping figure, stumbled his way to the shops. He caused me no offence, but thinking there were too many poets around, I took a shot at him one day with an airgun. The pellet hit him in the foot, he leapt in the air, turned round and berated some innocent old woman behind him,

and left immediately for the Hebrides.

In Markham Square I saw the last days of the war, with German bombers dropping cascades of coloured lights, Chelsea never looking more beautiful, all-night parties in Victorian coal-holes, and sunken cheeks in the morning. Once, while I was shaving, the mirror cracked from side to side as a V-2 rocket fell on the Royal Hospital near by. Chelsea grew increasingly deserted. One bright August evening I stood in the middle of the King's Road and shot an arrow from the Markham Arms to the old Town Hall. It bounced unhindered up the empty street. Only a stray dog stepped out of the way.

My quiver empty, my arrows spent, I moved into Edna O'Brien's house in Carlyle Square—though unhappily our habitation did not coincide. It was the late 40s, early 50s. The last all-clear had sounded. People returned from the country to their abandoned houses. Chelsea took a long deep breath and prepared for pleasure, and began to put on paint like a débutante. Women shrugged off their square-rigged shoulders and military suits and became beribboned and cuddly again. A bachelor then, I was occasionally visited by girls in loose Hungarian blouses. While from downstairs in the basement one heard slaps, shrieks of laughter, and the padding of bare feet on floor-boards. Sex had never seemed more carefree or funnier.

From the winter grey of war, Chelsea was turning its expectant face towards that pleasure dome it so hoped to become. But in those early 50s, before the Conrans and Quants had slapped down their manorial rights on the place, there still remained remnants of that elegant village Mother had imagined Chelsea to be—T.S. Eliot, in clerical hat and dark mackintosh, pushing John Hayward round the streets in his wheelchair, Eliot slightly bent and listening to Hayward's incessant chatter as though eloquence was the vehicle's chief propellant. Then Sir Alfred Munnings, in hacking jacket and jodhpurs, striking the railings with his riding-crop; Epstein hurrying from his studio showered in sky-blue clay; Edith Sitwell walking in reverie . . . Her brother, Sir Osbert, lived a few doors away, a man of deceptively livid appearance, even when some children and I, one bonfire night, put a flaming rocket through his first-floor window and burnt a hole in his Elizabethan arras.

All gone now, that lot. Even the long-legged schoolgirl who used to deliver my newspapers on roller-skates and was later to marry a lord. I married too, and moved to Elm Park Gardens, several streets away.

This three-sided square of kipper-coloured houses was stuffed then with families from the bombed East End. The last time, perhaps, for such a select Chelsea garden to ring with the jungle-cries of the scab-kneed poor. No "Simons", "Samanthas" or "Clarissas", yet, but "Sids" and "Berts" and "Brendas". The boys, scrub-haired and nutty-headed, sons of the coastal marauders of western Europe, having drifted up-river on tides of generations; and their sisters, sharp-eyed, squinting, sly and seductive: "You a hundred yet, Mr Lee?"

All day the boys played cricket in the road, and the girls chalked square games as old as Byzantium. Or stood on their heads in the garden in squealing rows of stalky thighs and blooming knickers.

Mid 50s; pre-television; perhaps never again in Chelsea would families live out of doors on summer evenings, children playing, mothers gossiping on doorsteps, chewing hard-peas and shrieking with laughter, babies rocking, dogs barking, cats slinking, pigeons panicking, while short bantam husbands, settling their caps and mufflers, trotted away down to the pubs.



JOHN BIGNELL

King's Road, c 1955, showing Chelsea Town Hall and clock on the far side.

> 'To my mother, a great reader of romantic novelettes, Chelsea was a place of high-tone fantasy, of bearded genius, swooning beauties, and garlanded studios overhanging the river.'

Among this rollicking community I was privileged to rent a small flat in a house owned by The Chelsea Housing Improvement Society, a discreet little charity devoted to preserving the past and to which my slender cultural pretension endowed me. Next door a young painter, of some renown and promise, lived with a wife of whom he was coldly and clinically jealous. He kept her locked up in the basement, and took her out twice a day to the gardens, and told her to run up and down. This done, he took her home and locked her up again. She turned out to be a better painter than he was.

Before the coming of the sterilized wine-bars and the brewer's boardroom extravaganzas, Chelsea offered a treasury of little rusticated pubs—The Potter, Markham Arms, The Eight Bells, The Cadogan, The Roebuck, The Man in the Moon, and Finches. The Eight Bells had Trog with his band of Trad Jazz upstairs, but otherwise into the 60s most of our pubs had scrubbed institutional tables and benches, with Battersea mums and dads, drinking their

twinkling stout in happy silence and swinging their short legs a foot from the floor.

My local for years was The Queen's Elm, in Old Church Street, run by the man from Glenamaddy, Sean Treacy. A man who never forgot a face, a name, a debt or a scandal; a landlord of legend who surrounded himself with a kind of belligerent warmth, and for whom there is no replacement.

For over a decade The Elm was a concentration of Chelsea, where at one time everyone gathered. In many ways a disreputable dump—slashed seats, poor beer, walls the colour of blood, floors like coal-dust splattered with rain, yet people came here to be reassured of themselves, to see others mirrored in the water-hole. Under his bellicose wing, Sean offered a safe roosting place for birds of many a different feather—dukes, lords, actors, writers, builders' labourers, policemen and crooks. Augustus John and all his sons and daughters, Ava Gardner and all her lovers, choirs of Irish priests, Nobel prize-winners and their nurses, will remember The Elm with special thanksgiving.



JOHN BIGNELL

King's Road tea stall in the early 1960s at the end of Royal Avenue—now a haunt of punks.

Towards the mid 60s the tribal cries of the East End kids were silenced, they and their families swept up into the council's new filing boxes down World's End way. We were not to hear their lively calls again. The dumb, parked motorcar began to occupy their chalked games and scuffed playgrounds, and with them a new breed of money.

In Chelsea, especially, money and the inchoate days of returning peace created a space to be filled with pantomime, plumage, sensation, invention and show. There was a more opulent tribalism now which, reacting against the uniformity of war, rejected, then reflected, in increasingly extreme forms, more frenetic group uniformities.

Teds, skinheads, boys in braces and bovver boots, Mods and Rockers, a pretty fluttering of mini-skirted girls, Twiggy models like boys, a sweep of Samanthas in pantaloons from the hunting shires, then more lately the grotesqueries of Punk. Chelsea Punk, where it was fathered, suggested revolution, and at the beginning perhaps it was; but now it seems to conform to its own *diktat* as regimentally as all the others. At first one could but applaud these cartoons of protest—the secret zips and leg-straps, pierced ears and noses, electrified hair and hints of self-flagellation.

Punk—commercialized and domesticated—is now just another fragment of Chelsea graffiti for which we can still feel some declining affection. But at least it let in the girls, so they could walk hand-in-hand with their men, each stamped black as Lucifer in their chains.

We'd seen all this expanding, in spurts of ebullience, from their drab, end-of-the-war beginnings to their kaleidoscopic present, from the day when Quentin Crisp first stepped through pools of fastidious disapproval along pavements now blocked by his unremarked imitations.

Over the years we've watched Chelsea emerge from its quiet, cultured chrysalis to the diamond-dotted butterfly it has now become. It has passed through its stages of transformation, from greenery-yallery to Reject-Habitatory, meat-pie and mash to Pizza Express, from beans with everything to jeans with everything, second-hand bookshops replaced by little-rich-girl boutiques customarily named "Ibiza" or "Shangri-la".

Chelsea is rich now, one of the prime oil-gushers of London, its fame and fantasies lubricated world-wide by fashion-sheets, films and the jet plane. The old pubs have been deloused, degutted, carpeted and tinselled, their names the only remnant of what they once were, like the names of old towns since violated.

Almost permanently scaffolded, Chelsea still has some handsome old houses whose value increases three times a day—inhabited by handsome couples, tall, tanned and double colour-spread, with permanently scaffolded marriages.

A place still almost completely unchanged since its founding, by Whistler and friends a century ago, is the Chelsea Arts Club towards the north end of Old Church Street. A small door in a plain wall opens into something only



JOHN BIGNELL

King's Parade, pulled down in the late 50s, site of the present Chelsea College and fire station.



JOHN BIGNELL

King's Road in the 60s: days of pre-decimalization and the original mini-skirt.

> '. . . German bombers dropping cascades of coloured lights, Chelsea never looking more beautiful, all-night parties in Victorian coal-holes, and sunken cheeks in the morning.'

Chelsea could offer, a charming little house of taste and antiquity—reading-rooms, billiard rooms, bedrooms and dining-rooms all hanging with excellent pictures of the founding time. And beyond all that a walled garden past belief: trees, lawns, fountains and a resident tortoise.

When I first joined the Arts Club, in the late 1940s, membership was almost entirely confined to artists, their models and mistresses, their varnishers, picture-framers and agents. It was leisured and usually half empty. Now the Arts Club has suddenly become The Place To Be, and almost any evening you'll see a coloured crowd pouring through the small plain door like bees drawn into a hole—dark-suited workers, bright-striped drones, royal-jelly-fed beauty queens. The past and the present are preserved in the Club, from white-whiskered artists to sugar-fringed models.

Meanwhile, up and down Old Church Street wander the tourists, maps in hand like Minoan clay-tablets, asking: "Vich vay, pliss—the Chelsea, yes? The King's Road—pliss?"

I love Chelsea—after all, it's my second home—but for all its slick shops and restaurants, licensed to print T-shirts and money, it has largely become a reproduction of itself, a parody of what it imagined itself to be, a place to which people travel great distances to find themselves taking photographs of each other, an arena almost entirely filled with spectators ○

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Colman Keane, who runs a prosperous wool business in Gort and exports to Europe, the United States and Japan.

GALWAY TRAIL

Hugh O'Shaughnessy's search for his roots led him from Gort via the intellectual life of modern Galway, to a medieval banquet for Americans in a long-lost family seat. Photographs by Mark Maxwell.

They certainly chose a beautiful spot to bury Daithi, those tough soldiers who lugged his body back from the Alps all those centuries ago. The hilltop at Rathcroghan is bare of trees now but full of thistles and covered with tussocks of grass where the hares race. The horizons are wide and distant over County Roscommon and the Midlands of Ireland. The sun is hot.

In the centre of a low enclosure is the boulder of reddish stone. It has been standing there for 1,500 years commemorating a clearly remarkable man from whom the O'Shaughnessys—and indeed most of the Irish now alive—can claim descent. Legend—perhaps it is history—tells that he had succeeded his uncle Niall and became the last pagan leader of Ireland. He was so nimble that he could fend off 100 attackers at once. In 428 he was killed by lightning at the foot of the Alps while leading his men against the Roman Empire.

On the windy hilltop the questions flood in about this remote chieftain of the Dark Ages.

What had Daithi got against the crumbling Roman Empire? Was he after plunder or glory? Did Celestine, who was the Pope of the day and the first to trouble about Ireland, know or worry about this marauding Irishman as he advanced southwards? Was the nine-year-old Valentinian, Emperor of the West, playing in his palace at Ravenna, told by his mother Placidia of the damage the Celt was doing to his domains? Did the young Hun Attila ever learn about Daithi? What compulsion made those Irish soldiers bring Daithi's putrefying corpse all that way back for burial? How did they do it? Were his wives Felia, Ethnea and Rusina there to mourn him? Were his sons Olill Molt, Fiachrach Elgad and Achy Breac glad that the Old Man was finally out of the way? How did they cope with Patrick the missionary and the new cult of Christianity which he was preaching in the country at the instigation of Celestine?

No one will ever know. But the stone stands as a mute testimony to the fact that Daithi was once alive.

"My name is O'Shaughnessy," I said.

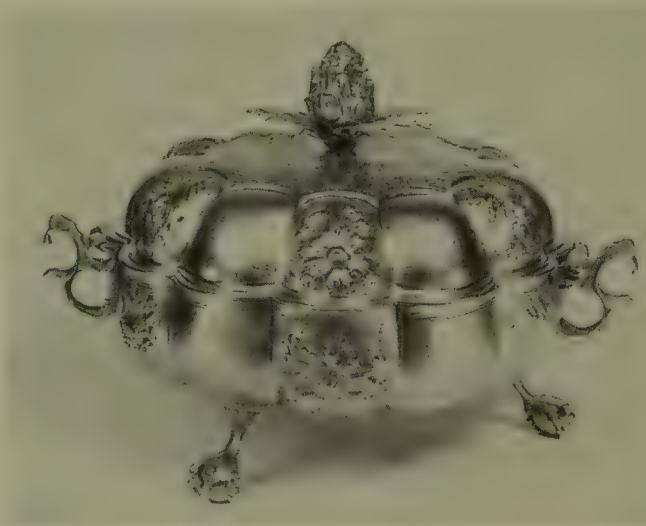
"We have too many of them here already, to be sure."

At 77, Gerry Keane's eyes sparkle. His sense of humour is as finely honed as the disposable razors which are piled higgledy-piggledy with the fruit and the paint, the milk and the pliers in his shop in the main street of Gort, an untidy little town 90 miles away in South Galway. Gerry Keane sits, bowed a little now but still

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Dun Guaire castle on a tiny island by the sea at Kinvarra in Galway. Lost to the O'Shaughnessys centuries ago, its present owners, "sharp-suited accountants from Limerick", put on medieval banquets to attract tourists.

genial and hospitable, in a worn grey jacket behind the bar at the back of the shop beside the taps of draught Guinness and Smithwick's. His son Colman, a great bullock of a man with a passion for rugby, comes in from the scruffy yard where he runs a prosperous wool business and sells sheepskins to the Japanese. By the dusty bottles of *crème-de-menthe* and other more fiery and unlabelled potions hang mementoes of Gort's past—old sabres, population lists from the time of the Great Famine of 1845, fading photographs and the communiqués of the IRA commanders during the war of independence against the British.

With his quicksilver mind and limitless memory, Gerry Keane is the town's local historian, the repository of folk memory in the style of the ancient bards and storytellers. He talks with knowledge and affection of the O'Shaughnessys, once the power in Gort, a family who produced a saint and who built their own little Celtic cathedral, who did deals with Henry VIII, fought Cromwell, lost their lands to the Protestant William of Orange and who finally gave up all hope of recovering their fortune and their possessions in the town after a ruinous judgment in the House of Lords in 1770. As he talks he hugs the expensively framed photograph of the 17th-century portrait of Sir Roger O'Shaughnessy that Joe Shaughnessy of Phoenix, Arizona, has presented to the town.



Above right, Sonny Molloy at Naughton's, his old-fashioned general drapery store in Galway. He supplies hob-nailed boots and warm clothing to the Aran Islanders. Right, author Hugh O'Shaughnessy beside the 1,500-year-old tomb of King Daithi, from whom his family can claim descent. It is Ireland's oldest recorded burial.

"Joe has a tremendous interest in the family. He's got the time and he can spend a bit of money on it. I think he should be looked on as the head."

Gerry Keane is effectively—and justifiably—the kingmaker of the O'Shaughnessy tribe whose last acknowledged chief died in obscurity two centuries ago.

"Can I offer you a glass of porter, Mr O'Shaughnessy?"

He pours a half pint of dark Guinness from a





bottle and I accept gratefully. Talk turns to Guillaume O'Shaughnessy who left Ireland after the final defeat of the Jacobite forces at Aughrim in 1690 and died at Gravelines near Calais in the service of the King of France in 1744. Gerry Keane takes down one of the unlabelled bottles and pours a very generous measure of a very strong brew. I am sent on my way very content.

Gort and the southern half of County Galway have none of the beauty and grandeur of the wild and mountainous Connemara near by. There are no big loughs like Corrib and Conn, the fishermen's paradises which stretch out to the north. It is a capricious, contradictory stretch of land. Round the town fat cows and sheep graze on fields of the greenest grass. A mile or two farther on, the grass gives way to scrubby wilderness where only the toughest and spikiest bushes grow and where an occasional reed-filled pool is home to a family of swans. Small rivers disappear down potholes into the limestone, mysteriously to reappear leagues away near the seashore. A mile or two beyond, even the bushes give up and there is nothing but the living rock. Here and there lone saplings challenge the elements. None ever grows into a tree. To the west rises The Burren, a bare outcrop of cliff which supports nothing but a wealth of alpine plants. To the east are the gentler mountains of Slieve Aughty.

The metropolis is Galway itself, a snug little city of traders, hoteliers, academics, churchmen and politicians which is going through a burst of artistic renaissance. In 1648 Lieutenant Colonel William O'Shaughnessy, doubtless on a visit from Gort, was given the freedom of Galway "in consideration of his alliance in blood to the whole town and for the consideration and affection that he and his whole family do bear to it".

The friendliness of the Galwegians disposed me to renew that consideration and affection. Today Eyre Square is packed with tourists from all over the world come to see the delights of the west of Ireland—Japanese professors, coach parties from Lancashire, Irish Americans looking for their ancestors, Spanish convent schoolgirls sent to learn English in a safely Catholic country, French families following the Charles de Gaulle trail, Germans heeding the writings of Heinrich Böll and seeking what he portrayed as Europe's last environmentally pure country. They cram into every last hotel and guest house and fish-and-chip shop.

In Galway's huge docks, built at a time in the last century when the city bid vainly to be the European terminus of the transatlantic liners, the French minesweeper *Sterne* is berthed beside the yachts of the city's small but growing population of yuppies.

But the city does not have to rely on the tourist. UCG, University College Galway, gives it an intellectual life of its own. The celebrations in 1984 of the quincentenary of Galway's early charter gave a boost to a revival of the arts which has become genuinely popular and continues to be supported by city funds to this day. In the Druid the city has a permanent and first-class professional theatre company, conceived at UCG, which has won prizes at the Edinburgh Festival, toured in the United States and is a frequent and welcome visitor to London. Their presentation of *Oedipus* in the version by W. B. Yeats with Marie Mullen in the title role is a moving and satisfying experience. Yeats lived and worked at Thoor Ballylee, the beautiful tower 4 miles outside Gort which he bought, renovated and immortalized in poetry. A hundred yards from the Druid Theatre an amateur company keeps the flame of drama alive in the Irish language.

There are a good number of bookshops, the finest being Kenny's where three generations of the family labour to turn over a stock of 100,000 volumes on four floors, not counting the maps and the prints, the paintings and the sculpture.

No one need feel intellectually or aesthetically starved in Galway. The only worm in the apple seems to be an upsurge in some parts of the Catholic church in Galway of a certain arrogant fundamentalism linked to the Opus Dei, a secretive right-wing Spanish sect much favoured by the present Pope.

Across the road from Kenny's, at Naughton's, Sonny Molloy continues a less exalted

Right, Canon Leslie Forrest, rector of Galway's Protestant church of St Nicholas. Below, the ferry between the Aran Islands and the mainland, in Galway's port.





but still traditional trade. In an old-fashioned shop with a massive, ancient cash register he stocks the hob-nailed boots and thick woolly underwear that have for generations kept the inhabitants of the Aran Islands out in Galway Bay from perishing from the elements.

Two churches rise over the grey limestone city. The bigger one is the "Taj Meehall". A modern Catholic cathedral of unparalleled ugliness, seat of the bishops of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora, it is a green-roofed monument to the episcopal bad taste of the late dictatorial Monsignor Browne. Its copper dome sits uneasily with a pair of oriental spires copied from the famous Indian monument at Agra. Bishop Browne, a tyrant in the worst tradition of Irish clericalism who railed against the sinfulness of ballroom dancing, travelled abroad and used to send back notes to the architect ordering him to incorporate this or that exotic feature into the new building. The effect is excruciating.

Browne has happily been replaced by an altogether more genial and human figure, Eamonn Casey, a convivial man of enormous enthusiasms who once worked for the homeless in London. He made sure that the Pope visited Galway for a tumultuous mass for young people. In 1980 Casey went to San Salvador for the funeral of the murdered archbishop Oscar Romero and came back a firm opponent of US policy in Central America.

When Ronald Reagan went to UCG five years later to get an honorary degree of doctor of laws, Casey was not at the ceremony and did not receive him. Throughout the city Reagan received a cool reception, with academics burning their own doctoral scrolls and demonstrators letting off from behind the cathedral hundreds of black balloons in mourning for the dead of Central America.

Eamonn Casey's conviviality recently got the better of him. He was found driving a car in England while over the alcohol limit and charged. His letter of public apology addressed to his flock and his fellow bishops served only to increase their affection for him.

The second church, St Nicholas, which dates back to 1330, is much more pleasing than the Taj Meehall. The oldest church in the city, it has been in the Protestant hands of the Church of Ireland since the Reformation.

Today St Nicholas stands as, among other things, a monument to the passing of British rule in Ireland. The walls are covered with stones commemorating 18th-century Protestant worthies of what used to be called The Ascendancy. Union Jack standards of the Connaught Rangers hang in the north aisle, alien flags now that Ireland is an independent republic. Embroidered with faded battle honours, they commemorate the regiment of the British Army disbanded after a mutiny at the end of the First World War on the eve of Irish independence.

Canon Leslie Forrest is rector, a young man and son of a clergyman. Though his small congregation includes the dwindling offspring of the old Ascendancy, he himself expresses impatience with the idea that Protestants in modern Ireland must still identify with Unionism and the continuance of British rule.

"I don't think I could ever work in Northern Ireland," he says. "The atmosphere there isn't for me."

Leslie Forrest was there with the rest protesting against the Reagan visit. Another protester was Michael D. Higgins.

"I," he says expansively, "am the westernmost socialist in Europe."

Michael D., as he is universally known, is that rarest of combinations, a successful scholar and a successful politician. A leader of the Irish Labour Party, a sociologist at UCG, a former senator and mayor of Galway, he now sits as a TD or member of the lower house of the parliament in Dublin. In a part of Ireland which normally supports the two traditional parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fail, his survival is a political miracle born of native cunning and a charismatic personality.

Child of a poor family but with a brilliant academic brain, he got his doctorate at Manchester. To the fury of the church he has campaigned in favour of divorce and contraception; to the fury of the US embassy in Dublin he has campaigned so hard against the Reagan policy in Central America that Washington's spokesmen in Ireland dare not confront him in the public media any more; to the fury of the tourist-industry moguls in Galway who thought he might drive away US tourists he worked against the Reagan visit. His constituents love him.

Long into the night we sat over a glass or two of rum in his modest grey house on the outskirts of the city where he lives with his actress wife Sabina and their children. We watched the television film he made on Montserrat, the Caribbean island which was Ireland's only colony. And we talked and talked and talked. Bettelheim's book on Freud, the situation in Mauritania (which Michael D. was just about to visit), the future of the Labour Party, the Blueshirts who were Ireland's experiment with fascism in the 1930s, Irangate, these and many other topics tumbled out as we debated on until all the neighbours had gone to bed.

"It has been a very Latin evening," said Michael D. in his tidy, precise voice.

"It has," I replied.

I drove thoughtful and elated back to Gort.

Eamonn Casey is bishop of Kilmacduagh but it is not an onerous job. Go a mile or two out of Gort and you see a round tower leaning 2 feet out of true, a Celtic counterpart of the leaning tower of Pisa and built as a place of safety from the Viking raiders. There is little else left unscathed at Kilmacduagh. The first monastery on the site was founded by Colman Macduagh, a descendant of Daithi's, in the early 600s but now the 11th-century cathedral with some primitive O'Shaughnessy tombs stands roofless in a churchyard where the pious are still buried. Across the road stand the bungalows of two or three prosperous farmers. The monks have been gone for centuries and cows graze in fields which were once full of pilgrims.


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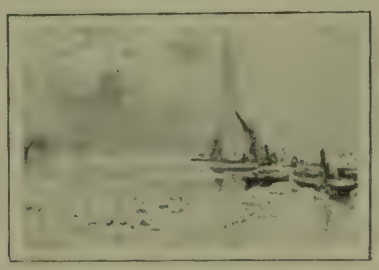
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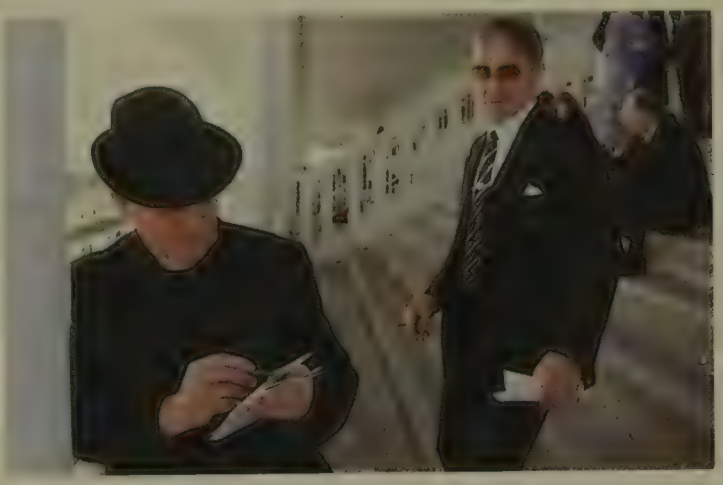
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A few miles beyond stand yet more ruins, Ardamullivan, a fine 16th-century castle, the object of a murderous family feud in 1579; and Fiddaun, an impressive pile, inhabited until the 18th century, whence William O'Shaughnessy fled to France in 1697 to become Guillaume O'Shaughnessy. The way back to Gort passes Lough Cutra, a Gothic palace designed by Nash for Lord Gort on land which once belonged to the family. It never seemed to bring the owners much happiness. Now it is owned by a London property speculator who is obliged to open it fleetingly to the public from time to time.

The O'Shaughnessys lost the castle of Dun Guaire at Kinvarra, a few miles from Gort, centuries ago. A handsome little fortress on a tiny island by the sea, it was recently restored. The Irish tricolour flies from the battlements and at its foot swans browse among the seaweed. Now it makes money for its present owners, sharp-suited accountants from Limerick, by welcoming tourists.



A clergyman marks his card at the Galway races.

But it is Marie O'Shaughnessy who greets them at the door, Mary O'Shaughnessy (*née* O'Shaughnessy) who serves them tea and scones. Mary's husband, Gerry O'Shaughnessy, a native of St Paul, Minnesota, is there when needed. Every evening during the season there is a medieval banquet with entertainment. Would this, I thought to myself, be another of those repulsive Irish tourist rip-offs where bad food, slovenly service and a dollop of irredeemable shamrock mawkishness are smothered under a thick sauce of blarney and sold very dear?

"There'll be nothing in it to make you cringe," said Mary. I wasn't convinced, but I didn't say so.

The evening I arrived at Dun Guaire Brian J. Dowd, an architect, and Beth Egan, his bride of an afternoon, both from New Jersey, were celebrating their wedding with a group of Irish and American family and friends.

The banqueting room looked lovely, the food was good, the service friendly and the entertainment witty and self-deprecating. Adrian, Rosario and Majella with Aiveen on the harp presented a malicious send-up of the castle's history from the Dark Ages to the literary visitors like George Bernard Shaw and Yeats. Only Daithi, never recorded as having come to Kinvarra, was spared. Mary had been right. No one had to cringe.

I will go back to Gort, and Galway, and Kilmacduagh and Kinvarra one day.

I might even stay ○

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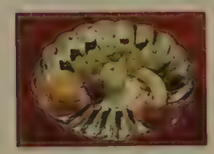
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5. From which Shakespeare play does the following quotation come?
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   (a) As You Like It (b) King Lear (c) Merchant of Venice
6. Which city currently has an assay office? (a) Edinburgh (b) Glasgow (c) Liverpool
7. In which century was hallmarking first instituted in Britain? (a) 14th (b) 16th (c) 17th
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THE MALDIVES

A recent addition to tourist brochures, the Maldives are a scattered group of coral islands about 400 miles south-west of Sri Lanka. Many are uninhabited; others have a sparse population of fishermen. White sands, lagoons, palm trees and the simplest of accommodation complete the Robinson Crusoe picture—though many of the beach bungalows now have air conditioning. You can divert yourself by diving, snorkelling and windsurfing or island-hopping for a change of view. Take plenty of sun lotion, swimsuits, sarongs and books.

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INDIA

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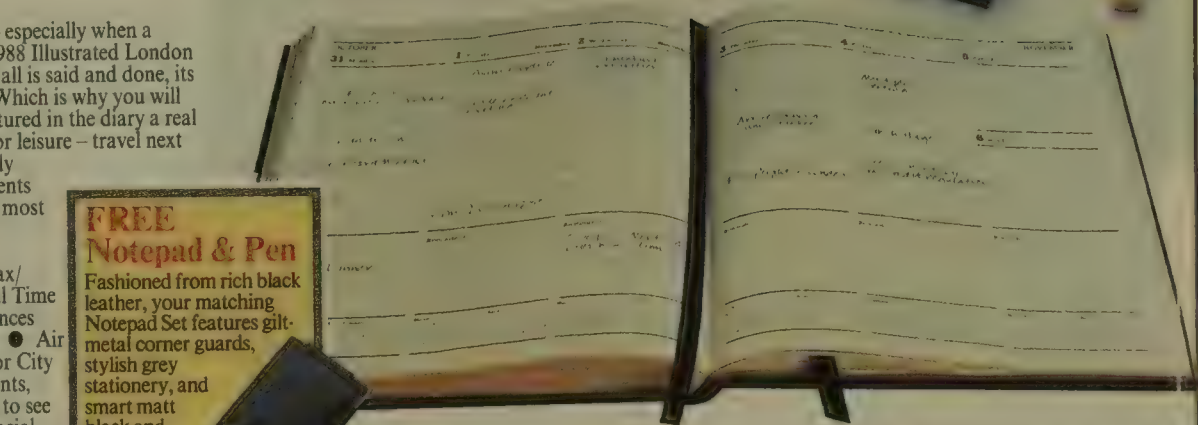
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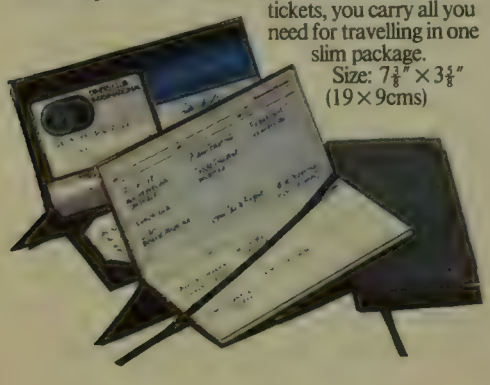
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THAILAND

Bangkok has a seamy reputation to live down, but it is also a city of temples and pagodas, and its markets are a shopper's paradise—brilliant Thai silks, jewelry, and fake Gucci handbags at around £3. Bangkok is notorious for its continuous traffic jams, but you can always take to a boat along the waterways. Peace and quiet on a Thai island can be found in Phuket which is relaxed, but already a well-worn path for package tours. Koh Samui, on the south-east of the peninsula, has been a favourite hippie haunt for years. You can stay in beach bungalows here from £1 upwards a night, and apart from Christmas and the New Year you can find a place without booking. For independent travellers, tired of lying on beaches, Thailand's second city, Chiang Mai in the north, affords trekking access to the border areas with Burma and Laos, heart of the opium country. You can rent motorbikes and move around freely, but take the advice of the tourist police when they warn you off areas where the army is in action against drug traffickers.
Kuoni offer five nights in Bangkok, seven nights in Phuket from £684, or Bangkok and Koh Samui from £933. (This includes half-board in Koh Samui.) Thomson Holidays offer a 12-night Bangkok/Phuket deal from £706, or Bangkok/Koh Samui from £934. Thomson Holidays, Greater London House, Hampstead Road, London NW1 (387 8484). Apex return to Thailand £659. Cheap charter return from £385. Further information: Thailand Tourist Office, 9 Stafford Street, London W1 (499 7679).

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Eilat	74 (7)	70 (7)	74 (8)
Cairo	68 (8)	65 (7)	69 (8)
Luxor	77 (9)	73 (9)	78 (10)
Mombasa	88 (9)	87 (8)	87 (9)
Delhi	73 (8)	70 (8)	75 (8)
Goa	86 (9)	86 (9)	86 (9)
Maldives	85 (7)	85 (7)	85 (7)
Bangkok	87 (9)	89 (9)	91 (9)
Alice Springs	97 (11)	98 (11)	96 (10)
Perth	81 (10)	84 (10)	84 (10)
Sydney	77 (7)	78 (7)	78 (7)
Majorca	59 (4.3)	57 (5)	58 (6.1)
Lanzarote	71 (6.1)	69 (6.5)	70 (7.4)
Costa del Sol	63 (5.6)	61 (5.9)	62 (6.4)

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Go to Trinidad for the carnival, then island-hop to Tobago for a beach holiday. Port of Spain hosts a most lavish and exuberant carnival in late February. The costumes for the bands, each of which has a theme, are worked on throughout the year. The beat of the steel bands is pervasive and you end up doing a sort of shuffling hop, known as "jumpin' with the band". It has the added purpose of keeping you awake as the night wears on and dispersing the effects of the rum. Superior jumpers are still upright by sunrise. Tobago is entirely different—instead of Trinidad's melting pot of many races and Catholic culture, the people of Tobago have a Presbyterian tradition.
Trinidad and Tobago for carnival departing February 13 from £1,142, Kuoni. Tobago only: five nights from £510, 12 from £629.

BARBADOS

Restless souls can take two-island holidays. Poundstretcher, Airlink House, Hazelwick Avenue, Three Bridges, Crawley, Sussex (0293 518060) offer a fortnight in Barbados and Antigua from £1,299. Kuoni offers Barbados, Antigua and St Lucia from £892, or a seven-night cruise followed by six nights in Barbados from £782.

EGYPT

Winter is the best time to visit the sights of ancient Egypt, though the weather can be cloudy. Fly to Cairo, where the Pyramids are, then on to Abu Simbel (flights can

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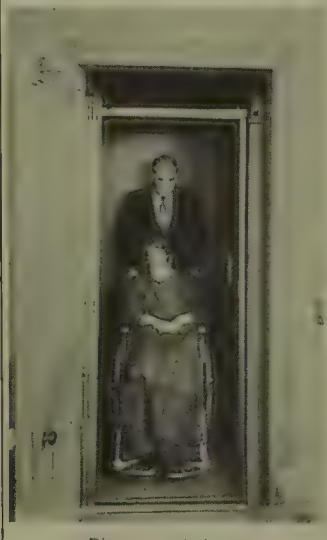
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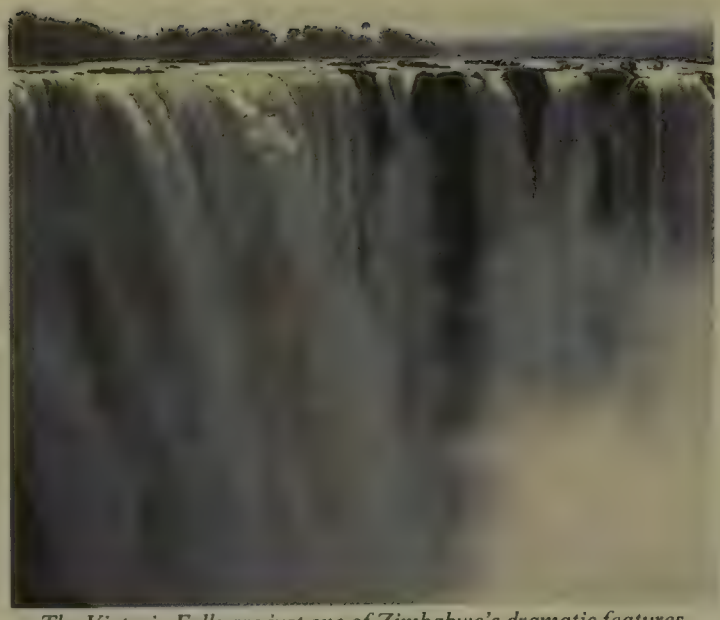
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be booked through Egyptair before departure from UK). There you will see the four colossal statues of Ramses II guarding his temple. Spend some time at Aswan, the country's most southerly city and now, because of the dam, a resort. Travel by road to Luxor, where you can make a donkey trek to the Valley of the Kings and visit the tomb of Tutankhamen. Then return to Cairo and go to the Egyptian Museum to see the treasures that were taken from the tombs. Precautionary medicines may be needed for gyppy tummy.
Sample prices: seven nights in Aswan from £399, 14 nights Luxor/Aswan from £645 (including Abu Simbel trip), Thomas Cook, PO Box 36, Peterborough (0733 502200). Or at 45 Berkeley Street, London W1 (437 9080). 15-day independent holiday, Cairo, Aswan, Luxor from £625, Bales Tours. 14-night sailtrek on traditional felucca boat. Sleep under the stars, and bring your own sleeping bag. From £495. Tempo Travel, 337 Bowes Road, London N11 (361 1133).
Further information: Egypt Tourist Office, 168 Piccadilly, London W1 (493 5282). Egyptair, 29-31 Piccadilly, London W1 (734 2864).

KENYA
Safari and beach holidays are the most popular combination. Fly to Nairobi, stay one night at the delightful Norfolk Hotel, reminiscent of the days of Happy Valley. Then fly to neighbouring Tanzania for your safari, where the game reserves are the best. Not so the food and amenities, which in rundown Tanzania leave much to be desired—you may find electricity switched off at 9pm in your lodgings and warm water for one hour only in the morning. Seeing Serengeti national park and Ngorongoro crater is ample recompense. Drop back into Nairobi, then on to a week's beach holiday in Mombasa or Malindi. Touristy, but still plenty of space. Beware the rainy season which begins in April.
Kilimanjaro safari plus Mombasa, 14 nights from £739. Seven nights Mombasa only, from £479. Hayes & Jarvis, 200 Sloane Street, London SW1 (245 1051). Twelve nights Nairobi, safari and Mombasa from £929. Poundstretcher.

ZIMBABWE
The country has no coastline, but there are fine game reserves, the Victoria Falls, and wonderful scenery. Not many tourists, because of rumbling political unease. If you feel adventurous



IMPACT PHOTOS

The Victoria Falls are just one of Zimbabwe's dramatic features.

Tempo Travel offers a 17-day tour of the sights taking in safari and Victoria Falls, from £1,434, or a trekking holiday, using Land-Rover, ferry and canoe from £1,537.

ISRAEL
Eilat is the closest destination to Britain with consistently warm and sunny weather during the winter months. At first sight it looks what it is—a dreary frontier town with a sprinkling of tourist hotels along the Red Sea. But sun is what you pay for and sun is what you get, plus some good scuba-diving, windsurfing and sailing. To make life more interesting, combine Eilat with a week in Jerusalem. From there you are within reach of Bethlehem, the Dead Sea and Masada. Jerusalem can be chilly—be prepared for the change in temperature.
One week in Eilat from £203; Jerusalem/Eilat two weeks from £392, Thomson Holidays.
Further information: Israel Tourist Office, 18 Great Marlborough Street, London W1 (434 3651).

AUSTRALIA
1988 brings the country's bicentennial. To avoid the crowds, try a camel safari from Alice Springs into the outback with bearded veteran Noel Fullerton, who learnt his camel-riding in Afghanistan. Visit Boomerang Cave, Yellow Waterhole, Boggy Hole and White Gum Creek, and mind the dingos. Or you can try hot-air ballooning over Standley Chasm, or fly with the Outback Mailman for the day. The tropical northern coast is hot and rainy from November to March, but the south of Australia from Perth to Sydney is ideal.
Fares to Sydney, from £1,070 apex according to date; from £650 return cheap charter. A variety of camping and outback holidays, including camel trekking, offered by AAT Kings, 3rd Floor, 15 Adam Street, London WC2 (930 9119). Explore Worldwide Ltd, 7 High Street, Aldershot, Hants (0252 319448). Travel 2 Ltd offers a 22-day package taking in Perth, Adelaide, Murray River Cruise, Melbourne and Sydney from £1,479. Travel 2, Hill House, Highgate Hill, London N19 (272 3090).
Further information: Australian Tourist Commission, Heathcoat House, 20 Savile Row, London W1 (434 4371).

LONG-STAY HOLIDAYS
There are special long-term deals in Majorca, the Canary Islands, Portugal and Spain, which may prove cheaper than remaining in England over the winter and paying the heating bills. OAPs can even get their pensions sent on. No place in the Mediterranean, however, can guarantee sunshine throughout the winter, and it may prove a sharp contrast to the blue skies of the brochures. It *is* warmer than wintertime Britain, and the food and wine are relatively cheap. Decide on the resort and the hotel very carefully, as you may be there for up to 70 nights, also whether you want a self-catering apartment, or meals cooked for you at hotels. Go as far south as possible, but avoid countries where you cannot go outside the hotel enclave without being pestered. Southern Spain has the advantage of an interesting hinterland and historic towns.
Seventy nights in the Algarve from £174 per person, self-catering (departing December 4). 42 nights in Majorca from £385, hotel with full board (departing December 28). Costa Blanca. 42 nights from £383, full board (departing December 29). Thomson ○

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Not all cars live up to your expectations. The Scorpio, however, may even surpass them.

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FOOD FOR PRESENTS

The kitchen becomes a Christmas workshop for Frances Bissell, who creates a variety of original and tasty gifts for her friends instead of hunting through catalogues or slogging through the West End. Paintings by Linda Smith.

Some years Christmas just creeps up and catches you unawares. This is particularly likely to happen if you are away during August and September when the Christmas catalogues start thudding on to the doormat. Soon after that, the stores open their "Christmas grottos" and by December everything looks so thoroughly tatty and picked-over that you would not dream of buying any of it. Other years you may plan in advance and buy perfect small gifts in the summer sales—bows, photo frames, lavender bags and night-dress cases in that familiar cotton print fabric. Wrapped up in tissue paper for months, they then emerge on the day, pristine, amusing and utterly acceptable in their un-Christmas dress.

This is not to be one of those years. The summer sales coincided with my working in the kitchens of the London Intercontinental hotel, from which I did not emerge once to make forays to Regent Street. Christmas presents remain unbought, but I am determined not to resort to the catalogue or the "grotto". If I were a handy needlewoman, I might make wonderful silk bow-ties for all my friends. If I were a painter, I would paint them beautiful individual Christmas cards. I would make napkin rings if I were a woodworker or silversmith, for I do love to use large napkins at mealtimes, and I love to be given them at dinner in friends' houses. If I were a poet, I would write a Christmas poem for my friends and write it out in a fine hand if I were a calligrapher. I am none of those so my kitchen will be my Christmas workshop, where I will produce food for my friends to eat.

One of them specializes in making the crunchiest, most flavoursome dill pickles I have ever tasted. He always includes a jar of these in the imaginative hampers he makes up at Christmas, and always slips in a cook book which he somehow knows we have not got on our shelves together with a new food item long before it becomes fashionable. Once it was pink peppercorns, another time it was laver bread and that same year I gave him a jar of chillies in oil.

A few months earlier I had been sent a stunning bouquet of orange chillies still on their stems. They lasted and lasted, and, realizing that they were real, hot, edible (well, almost



inedible, so hot were they), I took them off the stems and packed them into plain glass jars which I filled up with olive oil. I'm still using the now very hot oil and have not dared to try the chillies. They look most decorative on my kitchen shelf, however.

What if you have not given yourself enough time to make herb vinegars, flower sugars, or fruit syrups during the summer? Not made rows upon rows of softly gleaming jams and jellies from all our summer fruit.

Perhaps it is still not too late. Look around the shelves and boxes in your greengrocer's. You might find some quinces from Cyprus or even have some left in your garage or attic from this year's crop. Turn them into exquisitely fragrant quince jelly. Cranberries you will certainly find. The cranberry bogs of New Jersey must be working overtime to judge by the amount that now comes into Britain to adorn the Christmas turkey.

Last year cranberries coincided with a very short season of persimmons imported from Italy. Not the first small bright Sharon or kaki fruit from Israel, these were large, swollen, ripe ready to burst and a dull gleaming colour between amber and garnet. They were abundant, cheap, fragile and had to be used immediately. After making persimmon creams and ice creams, I combined them with cranberries to make an unusual and delicious jam.

Look for all the new season's citrus fruits from the Mediterranean, lemons from Cyprus, blood oranges from Sicily, large smooth navel oranges from Valencia, and consider what you might do with them. Think of a large glass jug of freshly squeezed orange juice. A perfect present if you were going to a holiday breakfast with friends. Boxes of mixed crystallized peel, or chocolate-coated strips of crystallized orange peel for the sweet-toothed.

I have to admit here to feeling a little sorry for those who give dinner parties in December and January. How many times have I put my small present on the hall table, after hanging up my coat, and seen jar upon jar of someone's "special homemade marmalade". I don't know why I do it. I do not even particularly like marmalade. I hereby apologize to all those to whom I gave my rather thin marmalade last year. It seemed like a good idea at the time—blood oranges, pink-fleshed grapefruit and kumquats.

However, my own row of jars is steadily decreasing since I discovered that the marmalade makes a surprisingly good, and very sophisticated ice cream. If I gave you a large jar, mix it with about a pint of double cream, stir thoroughly and freeze. This Christmas you are more likely to be given a jar of my lemon curd. Use it on toast, on scones, in pancakes or in tarts. Because it contains butter and eggs it does not, unlike the sugar-preserved jams and jellies, keep indefinitely.

Fruit in spirits, syrup or liqueur makes marvellous edible gifts. Dipping into a jar of them always reminds me of a farmhouse near Albi where a friend, Michèle, lived. After a long meal *mémère* would serve us one or two prunes or greengages in a small wine glass with a little of the fruity eau-de-vie, from their own small still, in which the fruit had been bottled.

All manner of fruits can be prepared in this way, in a variety of liqueurs and spirits. I like to bottle them in wine, too. It was my mother who first gave us apricots in Barsac. Knowing she would not have time to make a pudding for us one Friday evening, she put some dried apricots in a Kilner jar at the beginning of the week and covered them in Barsac. By Friday they were plump and mellow with the wine. The possibilities are endless: apricots in Muscat, prunes in Banyuls, muscatel raisins in Pineau des Charentes. They keep well.

You do not have to give presents with a

long shelf life. Food for immediate consumption can be a great treat. As a gift for someone who has no time for cooking or baking, a loaf of home-made bread, a basket of rolls or a tray of scones would be riches indeed. You could consider making pâtés, mousses and old-fashioned potted meat or fish. They would be welcome additions to a hamper, or delicious contributions to a Christmas buffet.

Whole books are written on sweet- and confectionery-making so I shall not even attempt to cover that, but think about making an assortment of toffees, brittles and fondants. Or you could try truffles—my favourite are white chocolate truffles which I make in very small quantities. To make two truffles, gently melt an ounce bar of white chocolate with a walnut-size piece of unsalted butter and a dessertspoon of double cream. Allow to cool, then refrigerate until quite firm. Work quickly, divide the mixture in two and roll into balls. Place in paper sweet-cases and pack into a small basket, lace handkerchief or scrap of cotton print. Tie a label round it saying "eat within 24 hours". As simple as that.

It would be a pity to skimp on packaging since you are spending money on good ingredients and even more valuable time in making these delicious presents. Think beyond Kilner jars and re-cycled jam jars.

Oxfam shops, and the like, are useful hunting grounds for unusual containers, as are jumble sales and the "seconds" shelf in china and glassware departments. A Japanese teapot might be used for the kumquats in vodka. A bone china mug for the lemon curd. Preserved fruit in liqueurs might be given in an antique rummer. Pâtés packed into faded old ramekins or terrines found in a dusty junk shop and cleaned to a sparkle.

Some things do look best in glass. Glass-stoppered, old-fashioned sweet jars, or that style, are just right for the goat's milk cheese in olive oil, and the olives with herbs. Breads and baked goods can be packed, when cool, on to flat wicker trays lined with a crisp lace-trimmed runner or doily. Or if you haven't got such a thing tucked away, clean, sweet-smelling pine branches.

Label everything carefully, give an "eat by" date and, if possible, list the ingredients you have used. Your friends will appreciate that thoughtful touch.

FOR TEATIME

Chestnut and raisin bread

¼ pint tepid milk and water mixed
pinch of sugar
1 heaped teaspoon dried yeast
½ lb strong white flour
½ teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon sunflower oil or melted butter
4 oz sweetened chestnut purée
2 oz raisins
beaten egg and milk to glaze
(makes a 1 lb loaf)

Put liquid and sugar into a basin and sprinkle on dried yeast. In a warmish kitchen the yeast should have dissolved and begun to work and grow after about 15 minutes. Put flour, salt, oil and yeasty liquid into the bowl of a food processor and process for one minute in short bursts. Knead together into a ball on a floured board until it is no longer sticky but smooth and elastic. Lightly oil a bowl and place the dough in it, covered loosely with clingfilm or a clean, damp warm teatowel. Leave to rise for an hour in a warm kitchen. When the dough is well risen (i.e. about doubled in volume), remove it from bowl and place on a lightly floured board. Knock it back and roll it out in a rectangular shape, about 15 inches × 12 inches. Spread with chestnut purée and sprinkle with raisins. Roll up and place on a greased, floured baking sheet with the join underneath. Make three diagonal slits in the top. Let it rise a second time for about 40 minutes, then brush with the glaze and bake for 20 to 25 minutes in a pre-heated oven, gas mark 6, 200°C/400°F.

Note: If you like spicy breads, sprinkle the chestnut with ground allspice, cinnamon and/or powdered cloves. Almond bread can be made by replacing chestnut purée with ground almonds mixed with melted butter and sugar to paste consistency. With this I recommend a light dusting of freshly ground nutmeg.

Savoury breads

Method and ingredients as above. Omit raisins and chestnut purée, and when you mix all the ingredients together, add one of the following combinations: 1 tablespoon concentrated tomato purée and a tablespoon dill seeds; 2 oz stoned and finely chopped olives plus a teaspoon dried oregano or thyme, or a tablespoon fresh herbs; 2 oz chopped walnuts and 1 tablespoon grated parmesan or pecorino cheese. Make into a loaf or shape into small rolls.

Dill and parmesan scones

½ lb plain flour
pinch of salt
4 level teaspoons baking powder
½ oz butter
2 oz freshly grated parmesan
1 level tablespoon dill seed or dill weed
4 tablespoons skimmed milk
a little extra skimmed milk for glazing
coarse sea salt, optional
(makes 12)

Sift dry ingredients together into a bowl. Cut up the butter and rub it, with the cheese, into the flour. Stir in the dill. Gradually add the liquid, and mix it with a knife until you have a soft but manageable dough. Turn out onto a lightly floured board and quickly knead the dough until it is smooth. Roll out to ½ inch thick and cut out 2 inch circles with a pastry cutter. Place scones, touching each other, on a baking sheet. Brush with milk, and, if you like, sprinkle a little coarse sea salt on top. Bake towards the top of a pre-heated oven, gas mark 8, 225°C/450°F for 10 minutes, until golden brown and well risen. ⋙→



Lemon curd

4 large lemons with good skins
6 size 3 eggs
½ lb unsalted butter, cut into small cubes
¾ lb sugar
(makes 2 lb)

Grate the zest and squeeze juice from lemons into a basin. Lightly beat eggs into this, and add butter and sugar. Set the basin over a saucepan of hot water and keep it hot but not boiling. Stir from time to time until sugar has dissolved. Then heat gently, stirring until mixture thickens. Pour into small, clean, dry jars (octagonal mustard jars are particularly suitable) and cover immediately. Label and instruct the recipient to eat within three to four weeks.

Cranberry and persimmon jam

1 lb cranberries
2 lb persimmons
¾ pint water
2½ lb granulated or preserving sugar
(makes 3½ to 4 lb)

Wash the cranberries, and put them into a saucepan. Cut the persimmons into quarters and peel them. Then cut each piece in half again, horizontally. If they are too ripe to peel, simply cut in half and scoop the flesh into a basin. Cover cranberries with water, and cook gently until soft. Meanwhile, warm the sugar in the oven. When the cranberries are beginning to pop, stir in the persimmon flesh. Cook gently for another minute or two, then add sugar, stirring until it dissolves. Boil the mixture rapidly until setting point is reached. Remove pan from heat, let it stand for 15 minutes, then skim the surface. Pour the jam into spotlessly clean, dry, warm jars. Cover the surface with waxed paper discs, then cover jars with cellophane covers, wetting them slightly first to stretch them. When dry, they shrink to give an airtight seal.

SAVOURY SPREADS

For starters or for afternoon tea. A food processor is invaluable for the preparation of these recipes.

Potted venison with juniper berries

½ lb cooked lean venison
¼ lb butter
1 tablespoon gin
1 tablespoon red vermouth
1 dozen crushed juniper berries
salt and pepper to taste
melted butter to cover
(makes ¾ lb)

Trim any fat and gristle from the venison and cut into 1 inch cubes. Put into the food processor with the butter, liquid and juniper berries and process until smooth. Season to taste and pack firmly into suitable small containers. Pour melted butter on to seal. Cover, label and instruct the recipient to store in the refrigerator and eat within a week.

Potted salmon

Use the same method but combine cooked fresh salmon, butter, white vermouth and a little fresh dill, chervil or parsley as available

Potted smoked salmon

As above, but combine smoked salmon pieces, unsalted butter, chives or dill seed and a tablespoon of lemon juice. For a slightly less rich mixture, replace half the butter with thick Greek yoghurt.

Rillettes

A more complicated version of the above and, therefore, worth doing in larger quantities. Use pork, or half pork and another meat, such as rabbit, goose or duck. It is also very good made with duck alone and a useful way of using up duck legs when you have bought three whole ducklings to make *magret de canard* for six.

6 duck legs
4 oz duck fat from the cavity, plus duck skin
4 oz belly pork
2 bay leaves
6 turns of the pepper mill
good pinch of salt
¼ pint water

Chop duck legs in two or three pieces, and put them together with fat and skin in the bottom of a heavy casserole. Remove rind from the belly pork, cut into 1 inch cubes and add to casserole, with bay leaves, seasoning and water. Cover and cook at the bottom of a very low oven, gas mark 2, 150°C/300°F until fat has melted, water evaporated and meat is cooked. Remove from oven. Place a sieve over a pudding basin. Remove bones, skin and bay leaves from casserole. Ladle some of the meat and fat into the sieve and with a fork in each hand, pull the meat apart into shreds. When shredded, pack it into a Kilner jar or other suitable container and pour some of the fat around it. Repeat with another ladleful of meat and fat and continue until all the meat is shredded and packed into pots. Cover the top with fat to seal. Cool, cover and label. To be stored in the refrigerator and eaten within a week or 10 days. Once broached, it should not be left more than three days.

FRUITS FOR EATING, DRINKING AND SERVING WITH MEAT

Dried apricots in Muscat

The following will fill a kilo jar.

1 lb best-quality dried apricots
1 full-size bottle Muscat wine

Separate the apricots and put them into a large, wide-mouthed jar. Cover with wine and seal the top. Leave for at least four days to plump out, topping up with wine as necessary. After four days you can divide into small containers if you wish or make a handsome present of the whole jar. The fruit seems to keep indefinitely this way. I've had a jar for months. The fruit is delicious as a dessert and also chopped up as part of a stuffing for pork or poultry.

Prunes in Banyuls

Proceed as above but use, instead of Muscat, the lovely rich, red dessert wine from the south of France.

Kumquats in vodka

Prick the kumquats in several places, pack into containers and cover with vodka. Leave as long as you can and for at least a couple of weeks. Use in delicious fruit salads. Serve them alone as a dessert-cum-digestif. Use a little of the vodka when cooking fish or poultry or put a tablespoonful in a glass of champagne.

Spiced pickled pears

Delicious with game dishes, particularly venison.

1 pint white wine vinegar
½ lb sugar
1 stick cinnamon
1 inch chunk fresh ginger
1 tablespoon pickling spices
6 cloves
2 lb ripe conference pears, peeled, cored, quartered and packed into containers
(makes 2 lb)

Gently heat vinegar, sugar and spices until sugar is dissolved. Boil vigorously for five minutes and pour over pears. Cool, cover, seal and label. Keep for at least two weeks before using.

Quinces

Prepare in the same way, but par-boil them for 15 minutes first.

Plums

Prepare in the same way, but use red wine vinegar.

TWO FROM THE SOUTH

Capture the scents and flavours of the Mediterranean with olives and goats' cheese preserved in olive oil.

Goats' cheese in olive oil

This looks particularly good in an old-fashioned glass storage jar.

1 goats' cheese log
2 to 3 cloves garlic, cut into slivers
several sprigs fresh thyme or rosemary
extra virgin olive oil

Slice the goats' cheese and carefully pack it into a glass jar, tucking in slivers of garlic and sprigs of herbs. Pour olive oil over it, cover, seal and label. This keeps for four to six weeks. To serve, remove a round of cheese from the jar, brush a little of the oil onto a round of bread, place the cheese on top and grill or bake in the oven until golden and melting.

Olives in herbs and olive oil

This is guaranteed to liven up the blandest tinned or vacuum-packed olives.

olives
garlic cloves
thyme
lemon zest
extra virgin olive oil

Rinse the olives. Crush and peel garlic. Crush thyme and chop lemon zest. Mix with olives, moisten with olive oil, pack into containers and top up with olive oil. Cover, seal and label. The oil is good in salads ○



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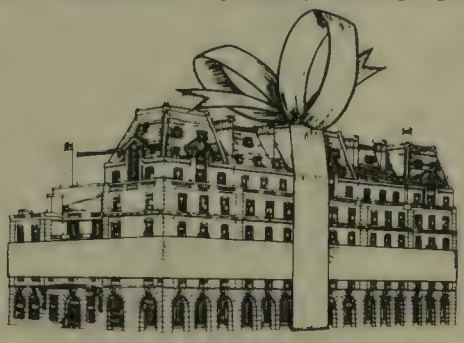
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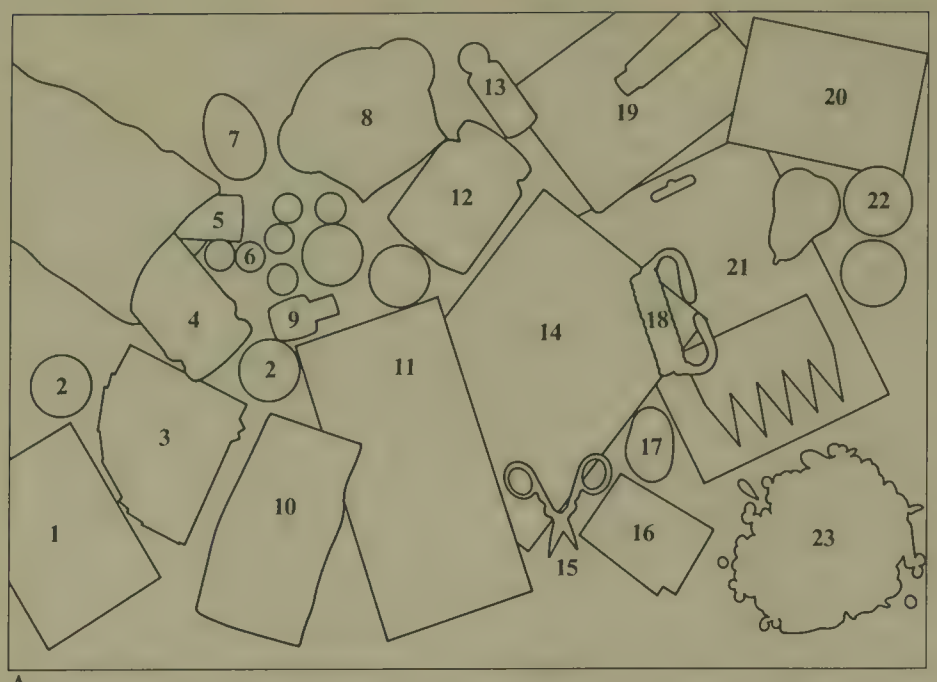
Stocking fillers

WHAT YOU CAN BUY FOR £1 OR LESS

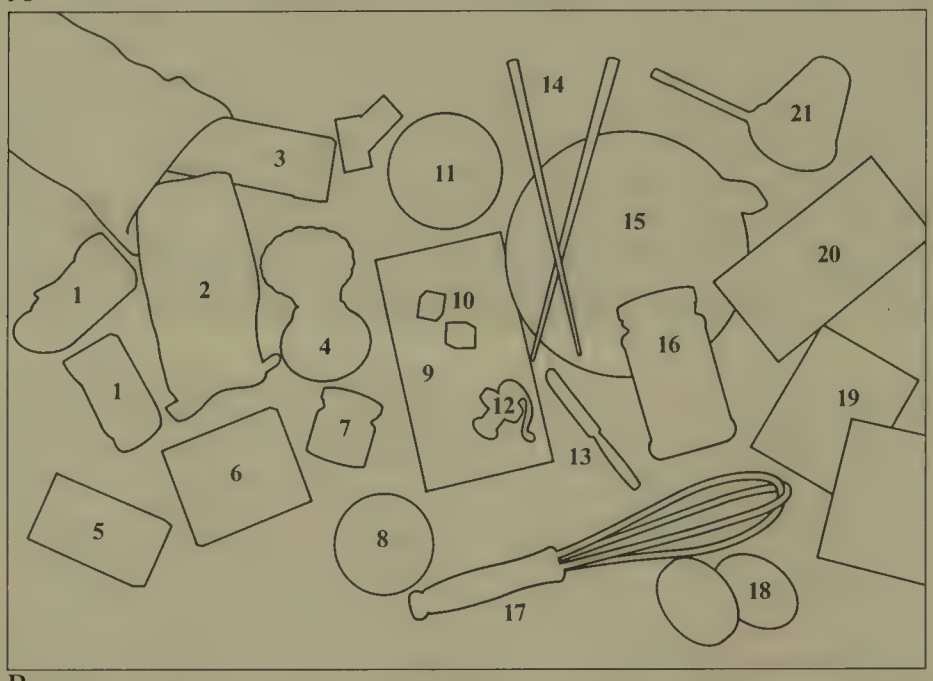
Father Christmas must face all sorts of odd footwear on his rounds. In the Netherlands children traditionally leave out clogs, in Spain leather shoes and in this country stockings. The thought of buying lots of presents might deter today's miserly Santa, so to find out if the old-fashioned stocking can still be inexpensive fun we went shopping for gifts costing £1 or less. Nothing on these pages costs more. See over.



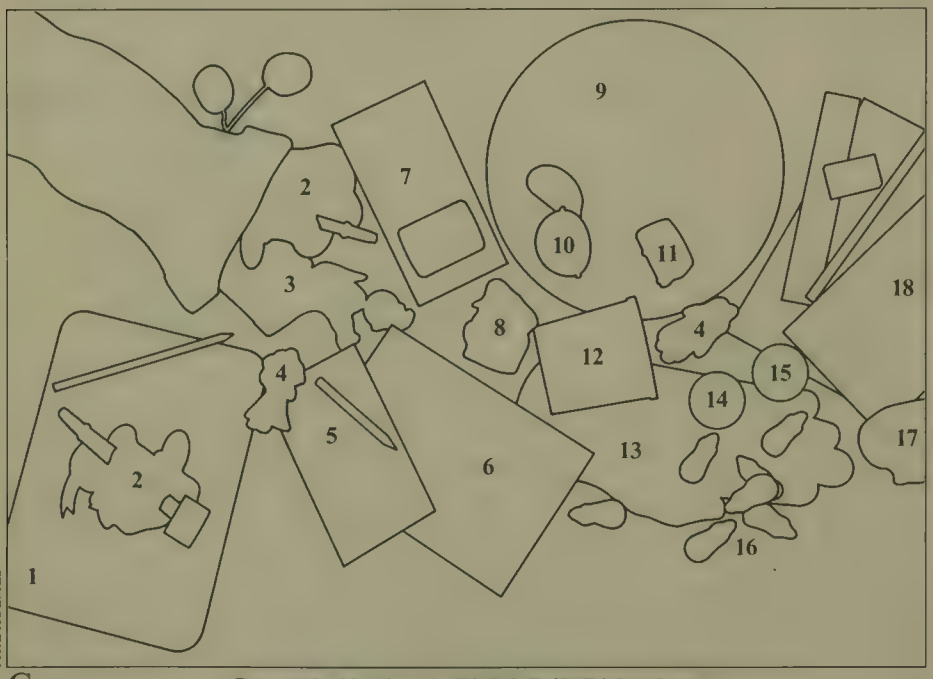




A



B



C

PHIL HOLMES

Researched by Angela Bird & Sally Richardson
Photographs by Martyn Goddard

STOCKING A

1 Crabtree & Evelyn jojoba bath seeds; 55p from Crabtree & Evelyn, 6 Kensington Church St, W8 & Liberty, Regent St, W1. **2** Blue Arrow practice golf balls; 95p from Golf City, 13 New Bridge St, EC4 & sports shops. **3** Twenty adhesive labels for homemade preserves; £1 from Fortnum & Mason, 181 Piccadilly, W1. **4** Elsenham Hot Horseradish Relish; 90p from Liberty's. **5** Crabtree & Evelyn vacuum fragrance; £1 from Crabtree & Evelyn & Liberty's. **6** Bath oil balls; 15p each from branches of The Body Shop. **7** Blue egg-shaped soap; 65p from James Bodenham, 88 Jermyn St, SW1. **8** Basket of needles; 25p from Neal Street East, 5 Neal St, WC2. **9** Floris bath essence; 75p from Floris, 89 Jermyn St, SW1. **10** The Tea House rosehip & hibiscus tea, 30 gram packet of 20 bags; 89p from The Tea House, 15a Neal St, WC2. **11** Cut-out cards; 80p each from Bodenham's. **12** Jar of whole nutmegs; 95p from Fortnum & Mason. **13** Floris guest shampoo; 50p from Floris. **14** Habitat *Home Care* guide; 99p from branches of Habitat. **15** Folding scissors in a case; 49p from Neal Street East. **16** Mini emery boards; 20p from The Body Shop. **17** Mini sponge; 40p from The Body Shop. **18** Nail brush; 75p from The Body Shop. **19** Fix-it kit; 99p from branches of Safeway. **20** Millefleurs foaming bath seeds; 55p from Liberty's. **21** Phostrogen water signals—tell you when to water houseplants; 85p from branches of Boots the Chemist. **22** Scented wooden fruit; 75p each from Bodenham's. **23** Kitchen garden pot pourri; 95p from Liberty's.

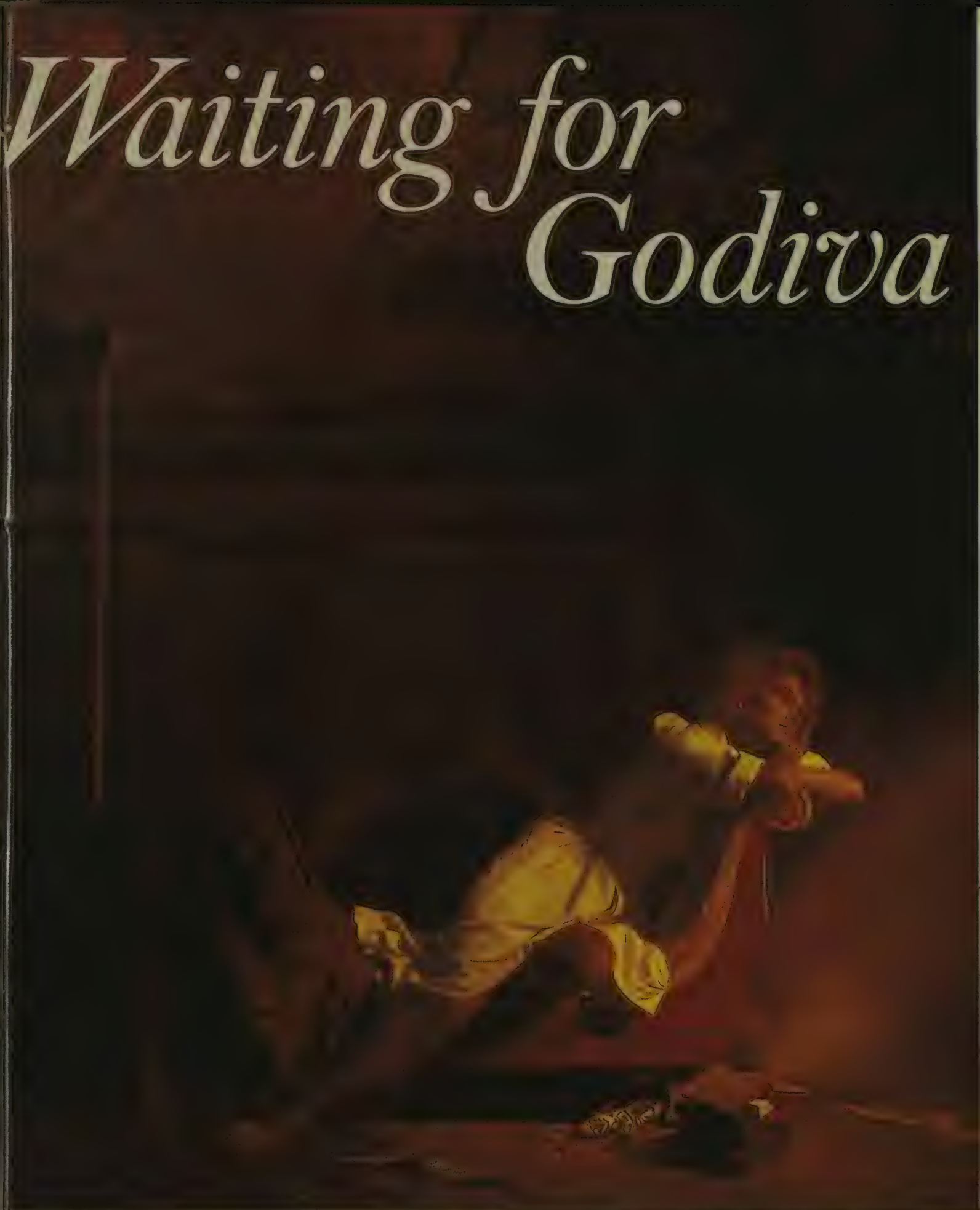
STOCKING B

1 Chocolate truffles in individual boxes; 50p each from Fortnum & Mason, 181 Piccadilly, W1. **2** Tea House Christmas tea in 100 gram silver packet; £1.20 from The Tea House, 15a Neal St, WC2. **3** Box of dominoes; 75p from Neal Street East, 5 Neal St, WC2. **4** Jojoba oil soap in shell box; 95p from Liberty, Regent St, W1. **5** Hand-cut coconut soap; £1 from Liberty's. **6** Box of incense cones; 65p from Neal Street East. **7** Spiced marmalade; 45p from Duff & Trotter, 13 Neal's Yard, WC2. **8** Needles; 40p from Neal Street East. **9** Marbled Filofax inserts; 68p from branches of Rymans & other stationery stockists. **10** Pair of dice; 45p each from Fortnum & Mason. **11** National Trust "Little Christmas Pudding"; 85p from The Blewcoat School, 23 Caxton St, W1 & NT shops. **12** Wine bottle stopper—perfect for Christmas left-overs (if any); 50p from most kitchen-wear stockists. **13** Little spreading knife; £1 from Fortnum & Mason. **14** Chopsticks; 80p from Neal Street East. **15** "Café" potholder; 75p from Gallery Five, 29 Neal St, WC2. **16** Elsenham Golden Mint Jelly; 90p from Liberty's. **17** Wooden whisk; 95p from Peter Jones, Sloane Sq, SW1. **18** Bamboo "dragon" horoscope box (1988 is the Year of the Dragon); 99p from Neal Street East. **19** National Trust cookery booklets; 50p each from The Blewcoat School & NT shops. **20** Suttons mustard seeds—hours of pleasure for children; 39p from most garden stores. **21** Bamboo tea strainer; 45p from The Tea House.

STOCKING C

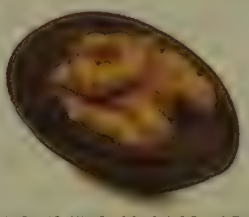
1 Slate & slate pen; 70p from Neal Street East, 5 Neal St, WC2. **2** Donald Duck party blowouts; pack of six, 99p from Hamleys, Regent St, W1. **3** Pop-up clown puppet; 75p from Neal Street East. **4** Wooden doll brooches; 45p each from Neal Street East. **5** Joke wobbly pencil; 25p from Hamleys. **6** *The Secret Garden*, among other Ladybird classics; 85p from branches of W.H. Smith. **7** Black-face soap—looks white, washes black; 40p from Hamleys. **8** Nerfuls Bobby—top & tail him & he's a ball; one of the Nerfuls characters, 99p from Hamleys. **9** "Eagle" Frisbee; 99p from Hamleys. **10** Pirate eye patch; pack of six, 99p from Hamleys. **11** London bus rubber; 60p from Skyshops (in the airports). **12** Play-Doh; 95p from branches of W.H. Smith. **13** Handy ruler & protractor; 99p from Hamleys. **14** Peter Rabbit pencil sharpener; 65p from Fortnum & Mason, 181 Piccadilly, W1. **15** One of a packet of three Shildkröt table tennis balls; 75p from Hamleys. **16** Sugary mice; fill a bagful of sweets at Hamleys. **17** Pink-elephant soap; 45p from James Bodenham, 88 Jermyn St, SW1. **18** Thomas the Tank Engine books & stationery; 99p the kit from branches of W.H. Smith.

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DESERT ISLAND BOTTLES

Kingsley Amis and Michael Broadbent luxuriate in their seven favourite tipples



KINGSLEY AMIS CHOOSES SPIRITS

Any properly stocked desert island must be assumed to provide a selection of mineral waters and glasses, ample refrigeration space and various foods and drinks. When I struggle ashore from the shipwreck with my case of precious bottles I expect to drink their contents with all the appropriate trimmings and accessories, not gulp them warm out of half a coconut-shell.

So the selection that comes first in the alphabet, Aalborg Akvavit from Denmark, will reach me heavily chilled in a small long-stemmed glass often replenished. The Danes infuse their national spirit with all kinds of spices, flowers and other vegetable matter, but the brand in question is flavoured with caraway seed. Akvavit is a very pure, clean drink distilled from rye or potatoes, deceptively bland. Alone among spirits it cries out to be accompanied by food, the Scandinavian "cold table" or open sandwiches of marinated herrings and suchlike savoury stuff—courtesy of the island larder. In this situation a chaser of cold lager is called for equally clearly. (Carlsberg Special Brew is the best, but castaways needed later for hut-thatching etc should limit themselves to two.)

To round off this feast I would open another of my chosen bottles, Cherry Heering or Peter Heering Liqueur from Copenhagen, a dark, richly sweet ⋙

MICHAEL BROADBENT FAVOURS WINES

To an ardent teetotaller my seven desert island wines will seem more like seven deadly sins. Even without the alcoholic content, the selection skirts dangerously round some of the recognized sins: gluttony, pride, envy, greed and, afterwards, sloth.

The first is that most perfect of all pre-prandials, champagne. Without hesitation I would choose the 1961 Dom Pérignon. Though not the rarest, it is the best. The 61 is pale and lively for its age, with a steady stream of fine bubbles. It has a creamy, smooth bouquet, with a touch of barley sugar: slightly sweet, perfect weight, lovely flavour with that mark of a great champagne: length and crisp dry finish.

My desert-island number two will be a red bordeaux—a Château Lafite of that great pre-phylloxera vintage, 1870, preferably one of the 42 magnums which were culled from the outstanding cellars of Glamis Castle in 1970.

I can remember opening and decanting one of these century-old magnums at a great pre-sale dinner in Christie's boardroom attended by a dozen luminaries of the wine world. It was perfection: still an impressively deep colour, still with the appearance of youth; it had a fine bouquet, gentle and fragrant—not a whiff of oxidation or over-acidity—and over an hour or so it evolved and blossomed in the glass. A perfect drink, lovely flavour, all the component ⋙

KINGSLEY AMIS

drink prepared with fresh local cherries crushed with their stones and used to flavour a distillation of neutral spirit. I think it is the best of all this large family of liqueurs, though the ones the Dutch make with apricots, peaches or bitter oranges are good too, and as digestives they collectively deserve a more constant popularity than the notorious surge of sales at Christmastime.

They have a remote cousin in my third special choice, Southern Comfort. This American liqueur, one of the few such, is based on bourbon whiskey with flavouring from peaches, oranges and, the makers say, "other exotic fruits and herbs". Purists are likely to turn up their noses at it for being not only sweet but a tremendous success, too, among the young and other low persons, many of whom seem to prefer it to Scotch and gin. Well, maybe it deserves better: a little harsh taken neat, no doubt, but a wonderful mixer in cocktails and long drinks, most of all in that fearsomely vulgar and seductive concoction, Champagne Comfort. Yes, I keep some of the overpriced fizzy tipple in my island refrigerator, chiefly for guests. A small slug of Comfort (50 per cent alcohol, note) in a glass of bubbly cheers it up no end.

I follow with a couple from the category known, not too helpfully perhaps, as fruit brandies or *eaux de vie*. Here the fruit is not a flavouring but the foundation: the drink is distilled directly from a mash of cherries, plums, raspberries, bilberries or whatever it might be. A third name for the family is *alcools blancs*, and so naturally the most famous and popular is not *blanc* (colourless) at all, but straw-coloured or light brown. This is Calvados, made from Normandy apples, picking up colour from being aged in wood, the only one of this group to be so treated. Like all its relatives, Calvados is immensely fruity but bone-dry. I find it a perfect finisher to a serious lunch, strong but smooth, altogether devoid of the uncomfortable after-effects cognac produces in some people.

Picking out another fruity brandy from its fellows is a task. All are expensive, all are aromatic and delicious (well, nearly all; I tried a very pricey one made from holly-berries that provided what the specialists call an interesting experience). They are so easy to drink that some of us are ill advised to let an open bottle stay within reach. More or less closing my eyes I would probably go for Poire Williams, made from Alsace pears. Drink it and the others at room temperature but out of an ice-cold glass.

Drink manufacturers are thrifty people and in many parts of the world they make and sell a brandy distilled from the grape debris left behind in the wine-press. The French version is Marc, from *marcher* meaning to tread, in full Eau de Vie de Marc. In this country the ones most often seen are Marc de Bourgogne and Marc de Champagne from those wine-making areas, but the one you get on my island, not easy to obtain elsewhere, is Marc de Gewürztraminer from Alsace, named after the wine and the grape in question. Some call it aggressive, an acquired taste and so on. Not I—I acquired the taste with my first sip, finding in it a spirituous reincarnation of that famously fragrant table wine. Marc often *is* "aggressive" but this one I regard as dangerously ingratiating.

All the above are obviously favourites of mine, but there are none I could not do without quite cheerfully if I could be assured of a constant supply of my favourite drink of all, The Macallan 10 years old single malt Scotch whisky. The preference for this malt over all others is no personal quirk but a large consensus in the trade. On my advice drink it not neat but with an equal or slightly lesser volume of water, Evian for choice.

So to the "non-evaporating luxury" allowed me by the rules governing these matters. I have mentioned already several extras like ice and glasses but none quite rates as a luxury in the dictionary sense, something "desirable for comfort or enjoyment but not indispensable". I plump for a decanter, nothing fancy, just big enough for a bottle and a bit over, with a ground-glass stopper. A decanter is indispensable for the testing of what may be a fable or a fantasy but may be a neglected truth, that all spirits, even the finest, change and improve with periodic exposure to the air. The only other necessity for the experiment is a supply of leisure, and there would be plenty of that under the distant palms.

The following are readily available: Aalborg Akvavit at about £12.50; Cherry Heering (£10); Southern Comfort (£13); Calvados, Un Trou Normand (£11.50); The Macallan 10 years old (£14). The following are obtainable from Ellis, Son & Vidler, 57 Cambridge St, London SW1: Marc de Gewürztraminer (£15); Poire Williams (£16.40) ○

MICHAEL BROADBENT

parts well-balanced and with those hallmarks of all great wines—length, persistence, and an exquisite after-taste.

Wine number three must be a red from the other great classic district of France, Burgundy, for whereas claret appeals to the senses, burgundy, they say, appeals to the heart.

Romanée-Conti has been described as the central pearl in that string of vineyards between Dijon and Beaune. Greatly tempted by the exquisite 53, I think I shall opt for the Domaine's 45 La Tâche. 1945 was, miraculously, a successful and memorable vintage in all the European wine districts, from the Douro to the Rhine. Production, for various natural reasons, was small, the wines unusually concentrated.

I vividly remember the 45 bringing up the rear of a "vertical" tasting of La Tâche. It dwarfed even the most robust of the young vintages. It was deep coloured, with a rich ruby centre, the only hint of age being the autumnal amber rim. It had an extraordinary scent, quite unlike its counterpart from Bordeaux, opulent, more vegetal, pervasive. High in alcohol yet smooth and silky, the wine's flavour opened up in the mouth—what is aptly described as a peacock's tail.

Wine number four is that *premier grand cru classé* Sauternes, Château d'Yquem. Of the many glorious vintages I have consumed (I avoid the word tasted; I never spit out Yquem), the summit is the 47; and I mean *1847*. This is the most renowned of all the 19th-century vintages. It became notorious for the price—in gold—that the then Tsar paid for it. And it is still quite amazingly good.

I last sampled it at a tasting at the château given by *the* collector of the old and great, Hardy Rodenstock. It is the most magnificent wine I have had in the whole of my wine-tasting career. It had a remarkably lively colour: a warm red-brown amber with an apple-green rim—a sign of age and quality. The nose was overwhelming: powerful vanilla, peaches, apricots and honeycomb. Still intensely sweet, full-bodied, rich and concentrated, it had incredible length and persistence of flavour. The perfume lingered for hours in the empty glass.

Wine number five is of a type so close in style to Sauternes that it might seem unimaginative to include it: one of the noble Trockenbeerenauslesen from the Rhine. Both wines are made, perilously, from over-ripe, shrivelled grapes smitten with a peculiar rot known as *pourriture noble* in France and *edelfäule* in Germany. Both produce wines with a high concentration of natural grape sugar. But there is a difference. The TBAs of the Rhine and Mosel valleys have a lower alcoholic content and a more zestful acidity.

Spoilt for choice, I have picked von Schönborn's Marcobrunner Trockenbeerenauslese, a 37 (a great year for Sauternes, too). The colour of old gold—to the uninitiated this would appear oxidized—it has a beautiful nose with that crisp fragrance of the essence of over-ripe grapes. It is still sweet, rich, concentrated and complex, with perfect counterbalancing acidity.

Wine number six is "the Englishman's wine", port. Although I love old tawnies, a desert island deserves a classic vintage port. The choice might be between Noval 31, Taylor 35 and Graham 45. However, I was given for my 60th birthday a Cockburn 27, and it was superb. Bottled by an old, traditional, no longer existing wine merchant in Gloucester, it had lost its pristine purple and was a medium ruby, really a ruddy colour. It had a perfect bouquet —elegant, dry, spicy—and was of medium sweetness and body but with a gloriously rich, exotic flavour, marvellous length and a satisfyingly dry finish.

All the wines mentioned so far are, I am sorry to say, hard to find and expensive. Specialist old-wine merchants might have the odd bottle; and bottles do come up every so often at auction. For my final choice I am being more practical. It is currently stocked by La Vigneronne in the Old Brompton Road. "Endearing and enduring", almost lost in the mists of time, my last wine is Madeira.

Blandy's 1863 Solera Malmsey is pure amber shot with gold; its tangy, almost pungent, ethereal bouquet makes it the nearest thing to a great old cognac. It is sweet, full-bodied, intense and concentrated, yet elegant and tongue-teasing.

I gather I am allowed one luxury. I presume that the latest of Herbert Allen's patent Screwpulls will be in the box with the wine, so I will take Hugh Johnson's *World Atlas of Wine* to drool over lovingly and to recall, when all was consumed, the little patches of heaven on earth which gave birth to such vinous glories ○



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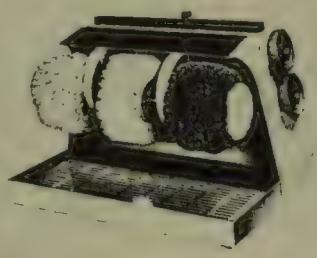
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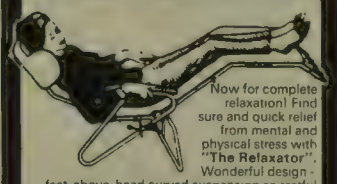
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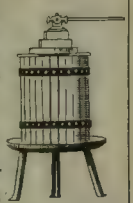
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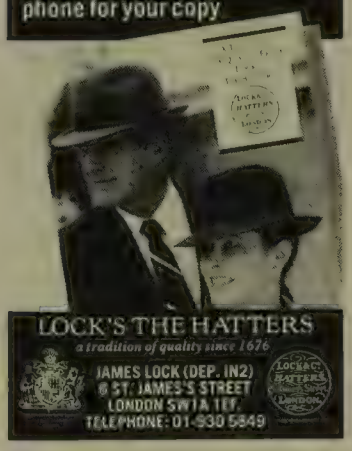
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£100 A SECOND ON CHOCOLATE

Sharon Maxwell seeks out perfect pralines and ponders on the cost of a sweet tooth.

The British are a nation of chocolate lovers. Together we spend £100 on chocolates each second and individually we consume more than 19lb a year. Christmas is peak purchase time. Yet British chocolate is for the most part bland and mass produced, full of sugar and flavourings and so low in chocolate content that at one time the EEC proposed that we should cease to call it chocolate and substitute the unflattering, if accurate, vegilate.

The British appetite for things sweet and the lack of top-class chocolate makers has attracted the attention of the Belgians, by common consent the greatest *chocolatiers* in the world. They started supplying stores such as Harrods some 15 years ago, but only in the last five years has their business boomed here. Now they supply not only up-market department stores, but specialist shops as well. Names like Godiva at £10 a lb, Gudrun at £8 a lb and Savernier at £7.80 a lb are the foody's latest foible. Perhaps the best British brand is Bendicks from £5.40 a lb.

The Belgian *chocolatiers* have had to come to terms with the British liking for chocolate combinations that might tempt them to hang up their chefs' hats in shame. For Belgians the idea of *mint* chocolate is as repulsive as chocolate-covered steak, but to win acceptance here they have been obliged to swallow their pride and concoct a mint chocolate especially for us. There are also regional variations in British tastes. Londoners love exotic white chocolate, while northerners prefer traditional dark pralines.

As a nation we are also peculiarly fussy about the shape of chocolates, showing a distinct, if eccentric, predilection for whirls and small dainty knobs. Surprisingly, we also favour the lumpen, unfinished shapes of some of the more exotic chocolates. Champagne truffles, for instance, look like hardened lumps of soil. We like to believe designer chocolates are wholly handmade, the chocolate maker standing constant guard stirring a bubbling vat.

The reality is more prosaic: few chocolates are now made entirely by hand. Raw chocolate is usually mixed with other ingredients in a large industrial vat at a cool 20°C. It is then poured into moulds, and the filling piped in by hand. Only unmoulded chocolates have hand-made coverings, the chocolate first being rolled out like pastry, cut and shaped. Even a top-quality manufacturer such as Mondose can turn out as many as 290,000 chocolates a day.



Pralines by Gartner.

It is the filling which really separates one top-quality chocolate from another and manufacturers worry about industrial espionage. "We do not keep the recipes quite as fabulously secret as Coca-Cola," says Stefan Stevens of Mondose chocolates, makers of Savernier, "but we try."

Myra Overton, a confirmed chocoholic who has just launched the S'il Vous Plaît chain of chocolatiers, feels that the vital difference between designer chocolates and the high-street rivals resides in the quality and quantity of ingredients used. The best chocolate contains almost 50 per cent cocoa (33 per cent for milk chocolate) and the fillings are flavoured with, say, peppermint oil rather than a cheaper peppermint flavouring.

Other hallmarks of quality include smell and consistency. But taste is the deciding factor. In my home tasting sessions I have also observed that quality pralines are not only richer and creamier than ordinary chocs, but also more filling. While I have been known to consume an entire box of Matchmakers in one session, I am hard pressed to eat more than three or four pralines at a time.

"Presentation is what sells chocolates," says Sandy Collyer, chocolate buyer for Harrods, "it's presentation that makes a gift."

Quality *chocolatiers* are therefore concerned to make their chocolates look tempting, lined up in orderly, uncrowded rows behind clear glass, each design distinct, so that you get the feeling you are looking at prize exhibits, with the added attraction of being able to pick your own selection.

If display is what lures the customer, packaging is what persuades him. Even the cheapest container, a neat paper box, should be beautifully wrapped and beribboned. More elaborate packaging includes painted boxes, china plates or ornaments, with china swans a perennial favourite. In Belgium there are also elegant chocolate sculptures.

Two types of package design at present dominate the British chocolate scene. There is the "sophisticated" box in dark, muted colours, plain with a hint of gold or stripes, and there is the "pretty" box in pale pastel colours with floral or heart patterns.

Some chocolate packaging is so fancy that you may feel guilty about breaking in. But top-quality chocolates are not meant to be kept for a long time and should be eaten within three months—10 days for fresh-cream fillings. After that, quality deteriorates and the chocolate may take on the bluish tinge which also occurs if it is stored at too low a temperature.

Whether you should keep chocolate in the refrigerator is a matter of debate. While experts agree that the ideal temperature for storing chocolate is 15-18°C, there is argument about how you best achieve these temperatures. Mr Stevens believes that the best options are "first a dark, cool cupboard, next an air-conditioned room, and only then a fridge," while both Sandy Collyer and Myra Overton think that the warmest part of a refrigerator is adequate, if you air the chocolates a little before eating them ○



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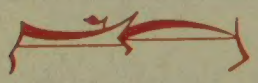
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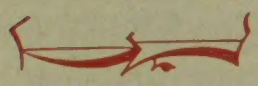
REFLECTIONS OF A CHRISTMAS ORGANIST

By Richard Ingrams

As a result of spending a good deal of 1987 trying to compile an anthology about England, I have developed an uncomfortable awareness of how much it has changed in the last 20 or 30 years. The many books by foreign visitors written during the pre-war period and later, described an England which was familiar to me. One of the most famous of them,



'Christmas has reverted to being a pagan festival, an orgy that lasts for several weeks.'



England Their England by the Scotsman A. G. Macdonell, emphasized the continuities and traditions of rural life—old pubs frequented by murmuring rustics, the vicar in the vicarage, the squire in the hall, the cricket team on the green. The picture is partly satirical, partly sentimental, but it was one that I could recognize when I came to live in an English village nearly 25 years ago. There were men in the pub speaking in an unintelligible dialect, all the cottages were owned by "the estate", and the cricket field, surrounded by three rows of towering elm trees, was usually covered in cowpats.

Outwardly little has changed, except that the elm trees (and the cowpats) have gone. But look more closely at the houses and you see that they have almost all been added to and "improved". The old rustic population has vanished and the middle classes, like myself, have taken over, rechristening our homes, in honour of their former status, "The Old School", "The Old Forge", "The Old Rectory". We are suburbans living behind the façade of a village.

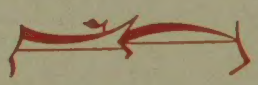
The only time when the inhabitants of this pseudo-village gather in force is for the annual carol service in the church, at which it has been my privilege to play the organ for many years. We sing all the famous carols and hear the familiar lessons, but sometimes I find myself wondering whether all this isn't a façade as well. Aren't we just play-acting at being churchgoing villagers for once in the year? How many of those present really believe, as John Betjeman did, that "God was man in Palestine/and lives today in bread and wine"?

Members of the Church of England must feel especially uneasy listening to the gospel readings at Christmas time when they recall that even the number three in their hierarchy, the notorious Bishop of Durham, does not believe what is being read out. That natural question of Mary's, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" and its extraordinary answer, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee and the power of the highest shall overshadow thee" (you will be lucky nowadays even to hear it in the version I have quoted, for those words have been deemed by the powers that be to be obsolete and irrelevant to today's needs) are, according to the Bishop, just a form of words, certainly not to be taken literally. Doubts, like those of the Bishop, generally shared, only add to the uneasy feeling that we are merely going through the motions.

The sense of a vanished England surrounds as much the secular activities at Christmas as the religious. The Dickensian jollities, the Christmas that Dylan Thomas celebrated in his *Child's Christmas in Wales*, seem almost as remote as the steam engine. Christmas was then a family affair with aunts and uncles gathered round the table or slumbering in armchairs after lunch. But nowadays we don't seem to have families like that. Thanks to easy divorce, many people today have several different families, children from various marriages who at Christmas time take pot luck, roosting for a day or two in one household before going on to the next one.

The telly takes precedence over everything. The bumper issues of the *Radio* and *TV Times* are more eagerly awaited than any presents or cards. What films are on? If there is a good one on Christmas Eve we might even skip the midnight service. Mother must make sure the turkey is served promptly so that we can watch the one on Channel 4 in the afternoon. We glut ourselves not just on food and drink but on films—old ones, new ones, half-remembered ones from other Christmases, none of them ever quite so good as we thought they were going to be.

Then there are the presents—each year more difficult to find. It is a commonplace for clergymen of the J. C. Flannel variety to lament the swamping of Christmas's origin, the nativity of Christ, by the flood of blatant commercialism. Certainly that flood seems every year to grow longer-lasting and more obnoxious. Christmas cards go on sale before the leaves



'The Christian religion seems irrelevant with its Christmas promise of peace on earth.'



are off the trees. Nowadays they come in a variety of forms. They may even be obscene, or special "gay" cards to go with all these unfunny "funny books" about naughty boobs and wicked willies. Porn has overtaken Christmas like everything else, emphasizing the fact that we live in a pagan country and that Christmas has reverted to being a pagan festival, an unseemly orgy that lasts for several weeks.

If the modern Church as represented by the Bishop of Durham finds the Christmas story impossible to believe, most ordinary people would probably think the idea behind it completely ludicrous, the idea, that is, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. We know about injustice, inequality, pollution and racial prejudice—but sin? Sin is a personal thing and not something that even churchmen talk much about these days. Peace and disarmament are more likely to strike a chord. But here again the Christian religion seems irrelevant, with its Christmas promise of peace on earth; though T. S. Eliot answered the objection perfectly in words that he put into the mouth of St Thomas à Becket: "Does it seem strange to you that the angels should have announced peace when ceaselessly the world has been riven with war and the fear of war? Does it seem to you that the angelic voices were mistaken and that the promise was a disappointment and a cheat? If you think that, reflect also that he said: 'Not as the world gives, give I unto you.' So then, he gave to his disciples peace, but not peace as the world gives."

Paradoxically—and most things to do with religion boil down to a paradox—it is easier, at least for me, to grasp the significance of the Nativity amid the noise and squalor of our contemporary Christmas. Mingling with the battling shoppers in Oxford Street one can see why it was that the most important event in the history of the world should take place in the back street of an obscure town in a forgotten country inhabited by some of the most despised people in the world: an event that was ignored by everybody, except for a handful of shepherds. "And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not." ○

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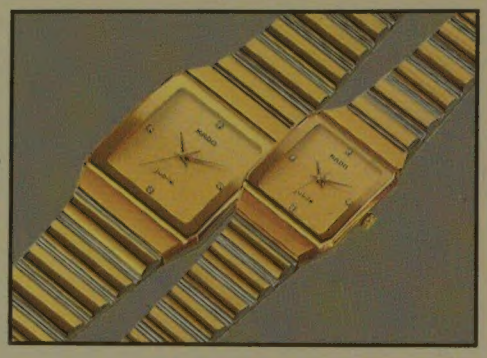
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